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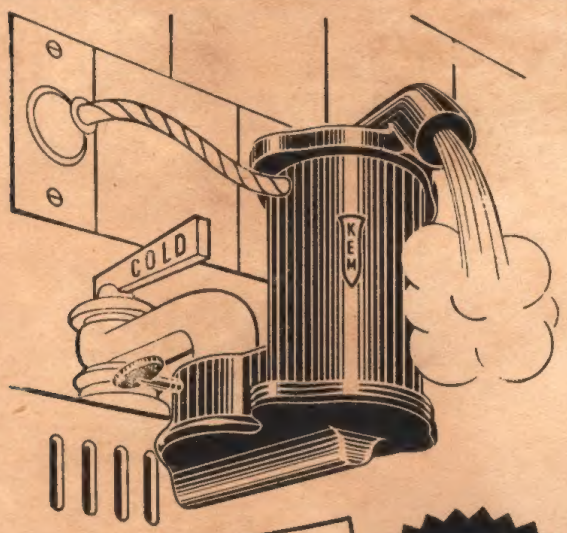

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 32, NUMBER 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION OCTOBER, 1948

COMPLETE NOVEL

Gold of the Aztecs

By Jackson Cole

When the ancient Indian mystery of the vampire god, Quetzalcoatl, haunts Texas once more, Jim Hatfield enlists his thundering guns in a grim campaign against rampaging, murderous outlaws! 13

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The saga of Jim Gillett — second in a series about Famous Texas Rangers

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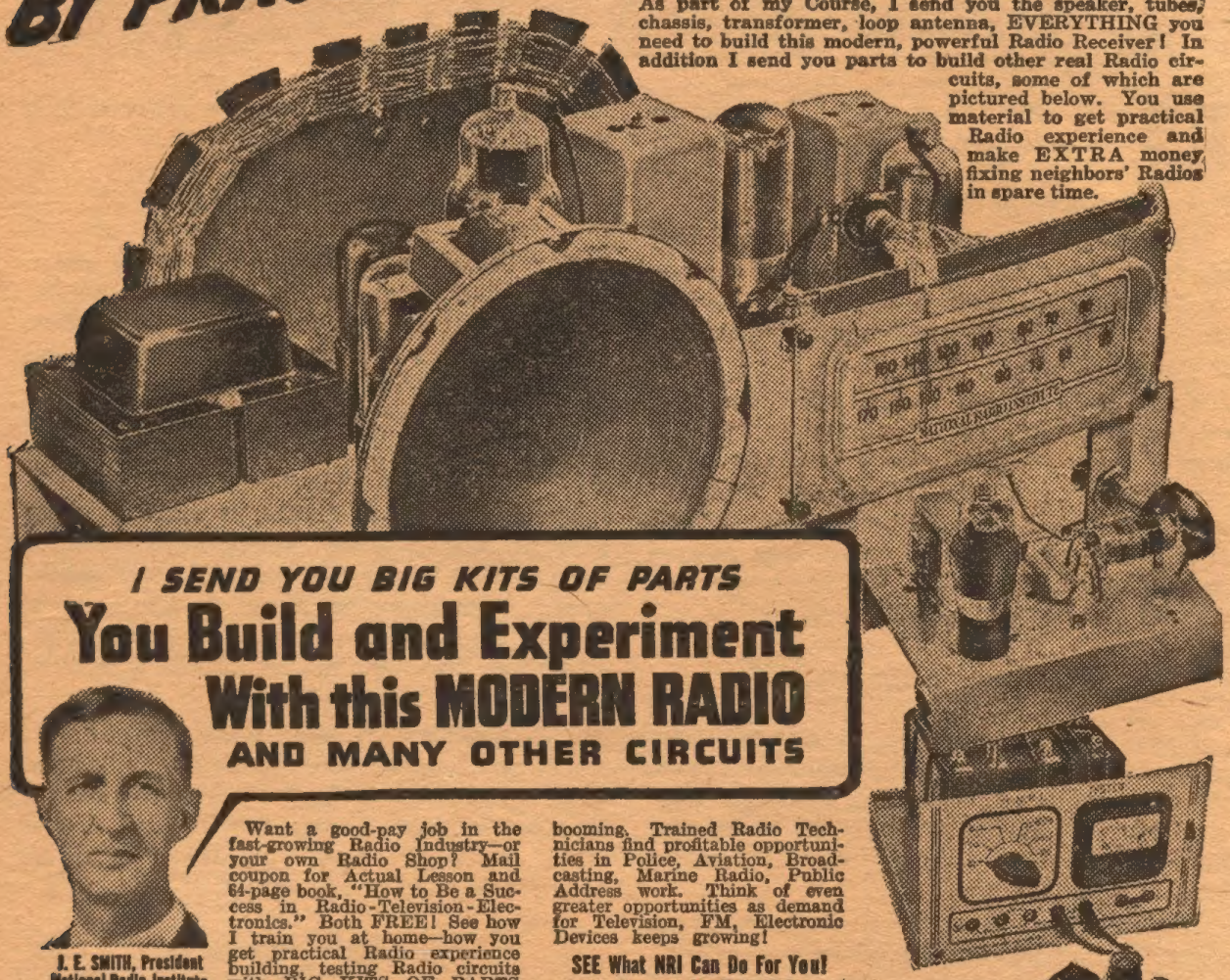

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HIYA, gals and galluses! I need you folks to help me out of a little legal mixup. It isn't much. It just concerns ownership of the moon.

I see where two gents, named Eaton and Honhold, who live in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, have filed claim to the moon. They're too late. It happens that I've got prior claim, as you all know.

You recollect that awhile back we held confab on the subject of rainmaking? I told how Nevada and Utah were wrangling, because a Nevada cattle rancher was fixing to milk dry passing clouds, before they drifted over Utah, where the moisture was needed bad. The Nevada outfit was dropping dry ice and such to produce downpours.

My Brand on the Moon

From that we went on to observe how modern science is expanding mankind's frontiers up and down, as well as sideways. That was when I gave notice that the moon was mine, on account of nobody else claiming it yet.

I didn't aim to settle on it, homestead style. Not right away, anyhow, being hindered by transportation difficulties. But I did put my brand on the moon, along with all subsidiary rights, including moonlight, which I figure to rent out to romantic couples and coon hunters, along with royalty fees from song writers.

That settles it, so far's I'm concerned. In pioneer days, large hunks of earth from Texas west were staked out and appropriated thataway. There's no law obliging a man to put a fence around his property, is there, to prove it's his?

Yes, I've got hold of a pretty good proposition, all right. Those gents, Eaton and Honhold, I reckon they thought they had too when they filed their claim with the U. S. Department of the Interior. But Secretary Krug denied that claim on the grounds that the Land Office lacks jurisdiction.

Ready For Claim Jumpers

But there's no telling when other claim jumpers will show up. That's why I'm freshening up your memory as to how and when I obtained the planet in question. I'll be mighty much obliged if you all back me up, if need be. When I get my moon spread to going, I'll invite the whole bunch of you on a looksee, Messrs. Eaton and Honhold included.

Speaking of rival claims, it came as a big surprise lately when government statistics showed that Texas is growing faster, industrially, than any other State. It was a shock to California boosters, who hitherto had let on as how their State was sprouting smokestacks faster than any other.

The Californiacs say now that there's something haywire with Uncle Sam's figures. That's one nice thing about statistics. If they're to your liking, they're the gospel truth. If they're agin you, it's a cinch to prove that they're all wrong.

The Coyote Population

This puts me in mind of the time when I helped out in a survey of the coyote population on a cattle range, before and after a trapper was hired to thin 'em down. The tally showed that there were more of the varmints after the extermination program than before! The trouble was that we didn't know of any method to show which coyotes hadn't been counted, and which were counted two-three times.

Since then, some savvy hombre has devised a practical scheme for range tallying. In Colorado, a check was made of the deer population. This census was made plumb accurate by the use of bows and arrows!

(Continued on page 8)

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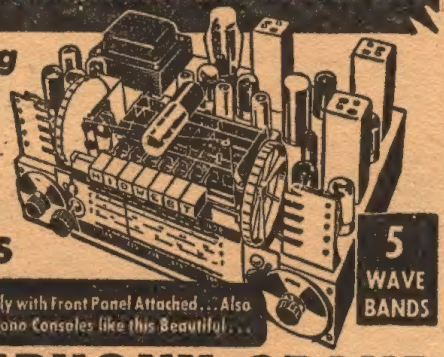

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

How? Well, every deer sighted was shot with an arrow that had a paint-soaked swab on the end of it. That plainly branded each counted deer. They even went further. By using paint of different colors, in various parts of the range, they learned where and when the deer migrated around.

The world is full of interesting things, and it's too bad that none of us is likely to live long enough to learn them all. But if you hanker for knowledge in wide variety, I recommend that you get in touch with the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25 D. C. Booklets on every conceivable subject are sold at low cost—10c to 25c for most of 'em. You can educate yourself on how to start and operate a feed and farm supply store (15c) to how to find and choose work you're suited for—"Guide for Analyzing Jobs," 10c.

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For a handful of change you can learn about almost anything under the sun—or the moon—from animal husbandry to zoology. If you're starting a new business, I'd say that booklets on the subject are about the wisest investment you can make.

You can send for a list of available booklets and bulletins and take your pick, ordering by catalogue number. For instance, Number C 36.7:52 tells you how to establish and operate a trucking business. C 36.7:48 gives you the real dirt on starting a confectionery and tobacco store.

The main reason why so many folks fail in small, new business ventures is that they don't learn before they leap. There are some exceptions, naturally. Here's an odd little success story about an attractive gal that rented office space across from a busy post-office and started a package wrapping service.

Her investment was small—just a few dollars worth of paper, twine and stickum tape, along with a pile of cardboard cartons she got for free at food stores.

When I dropped in the other day, she was doing a land office business, with clients plumb tickled to pay 25c and up to get their mailing packages done up. Her biggest booster was the local postmaster, because she reduced the nuisance of parcels badly-wrapped by stringsavers.

(Continued on page 10)

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 8)

She didn't know any more than a jackrabbit about wrapping and knot-tying when she started. Now she neatly and quickly wraps anything the customers can get through the door—with her eyes shut. Only drawback to the business, she told me with a regretful look at her fingers, is that it plays heck with a manicure.

Seems as though some folks are cut out to run their own businesses, and others are better off working for others. I know an ex-cowboy who quit his job to start a specialty shop, making nothing but de luxe horse trailers. At last account, he was prospering.

Get a Horse!

And there's a peculiar thing: it used to be that horse-owners strived to get an automobile. Nowadays, the ambition of auto-owning families is to make enough money to afford a horse. That's the way it is, anyhow, in many a Western community, where riding is a growing craze among young and old. I heard about a fashionable couple that split up and when they divided their property, the missus refused the home they owned and picked their three horses for her share, instead.

I reckon it's a natural craving, in this day of machines, for folks to surround themselves with living critters, from palominos to goldfish. A sign of that human instinct is in the growth and spread of pet stores. Maybe you've noticed it. And there's always a list of lost and found pets in the want ads, a heartache in every one, with a happy ending when a wandering dog or cat is returned home. Once in a while you see an ad for a stray horse.

Twists of Language

There are so many peculiar twists in our language that I wonder how any foreigner ever can learn it. A confused Mexicano asked me:

"Senor Capitan, why do you say a ship's load is a CARGO, and a carload is a SHIPMENT?"

Quien sabe, who knows? I don't. I'm not much on languages. I'd mighty like to learn how to speak some animal language, though, specially cat language. That's probably be-

(Continued on page 108)

What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as fundamental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a non-profit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

Not For General Distribution

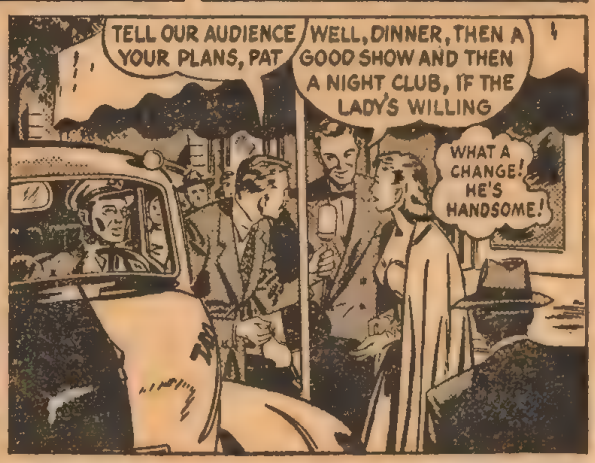
Sincere men and women, in search of the truth—those who wish to fit in with the ways of the world—are invited to write for a complimentary copy of the sealed booklet, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how to contact the librarian of the archives of AMORC for this rare knowledge. This booklet is not intended for general distribution; nor is it sent without request. It is therefore suggested that you write for your copy to Scribe H. Q. V.

The ROSICRUCIANS
[AMORC]
San Jose California

THINGS BROKE RIGHT FOR PAT WHEN...

TIRED AND DISHEARTENED AFTER A LONG DAY OF ATTEMPTING TO SELL HIS FIRST PLAY, YOUNG PAT MARTIN HAD JUST DROPPED IN TO WATCH A RADIO QUIZ SHOW. BUT THEN...

MINUTES LATER
PLEASE...IT WAS AN ACCIDENT. I'M PENNILESS. I'VE BEEN SICK AND OUT OF WORK
YOU BROKE IT! PAY ME TEN DOLLARS OR I'LL CALL A COP!
I'LL HELP HER OUT!


TELL OUR AUDIENCE YOUR PLANS, PAT
WELL, DINNER, THEN A GOOD SHOW AND THEN A NIGHT CLUB, IF THE LADY'S WILLING
WHAT A CHANGE! HE'S HANDSOME!

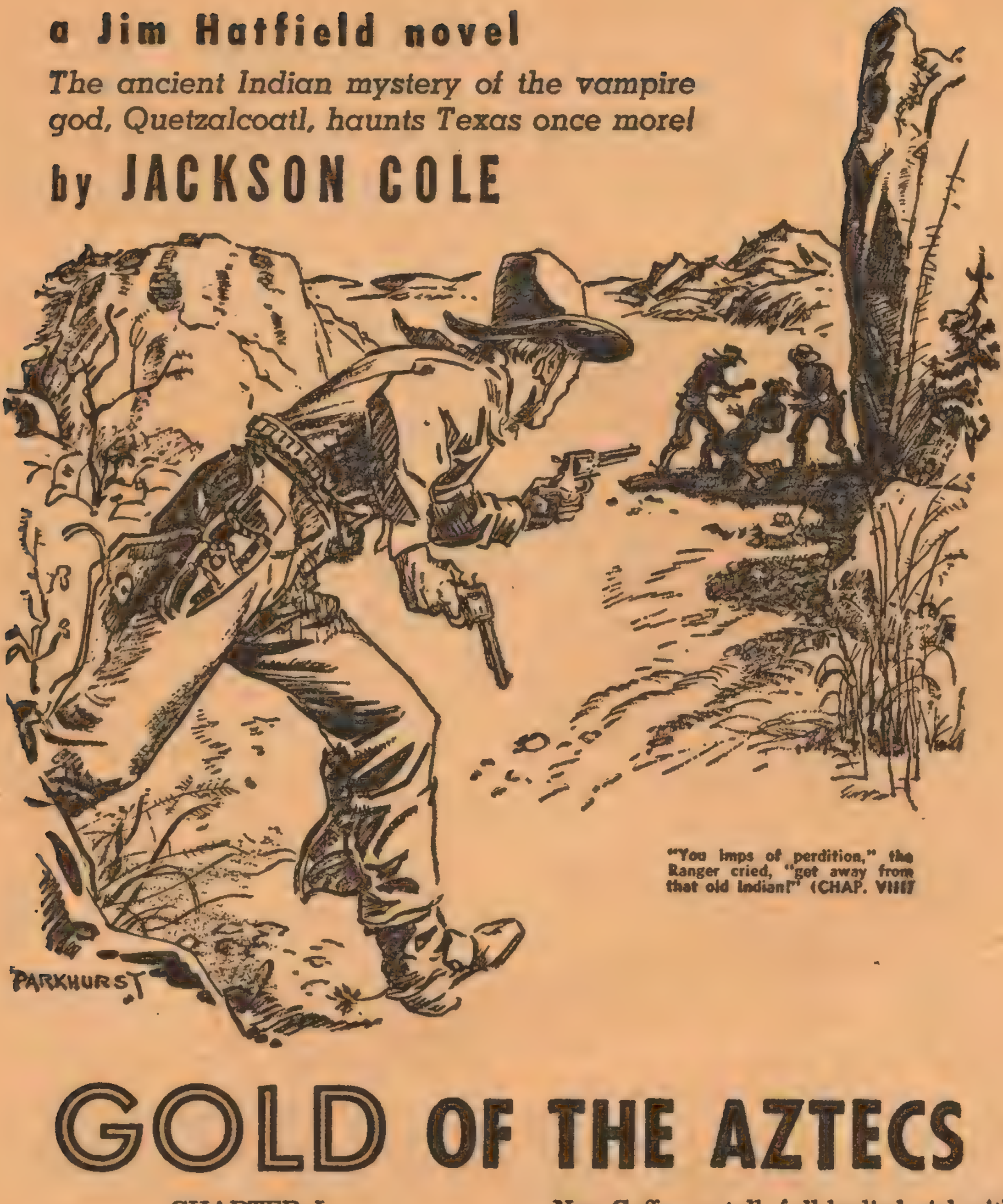
IF MY BROTHER LIKES YOUR PLAY, IT'S AS GOOD AS SOLD. HE'S THE BEST AGENT IN TOWN
GREAT! THEN I'LL CALL FOR YOU TOMORROW AT THE STUDIO
SHE'S TERRIFIC!
AFTER THE SHOW

YOU ALWAYS GET SMOOTH, PLEASANT SHAVES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK AND FEEL SWELL WITH THIN GILLETTES...THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. ALSO YOU AVOID THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION OF MISFIT BLADES WHEN YOU USE THIN GILLETTES IN YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR. THEY ARE PRECISION-MADE TO FIT EXACTLY. ENJOY TRUE SHAVING COMFORT WITH THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4-10¢
10-25¢
New ten-blade package has compartment for used blades.

a Jim Hatfield novel

The ancient Indian mystery of the vampire god, Quetzalcoatl, haunts Texas once more!

by JACKSON COLE



"You imps of perdition," the Ranger cried, "get away from that old Indian!" (CHAP. VIII)

GOLD OF THE AZTECS

CHAPTER I

Blond Outlaw

IT WAS midafternoon when Jim Coffee, owner of the Circle 3 outfit, saddled his big roan and headed out toward the southern part of his range. In one pocket of his *charro* jacket he had a bottle of whisky, in the other a small silver bell.

Nan Coffee, a tall, full-bodied girl with hair the bright golden color of Texas sunshine, watched her father anxiously from the ranchhouse doorway.

"Be careful, Father!" she called. "I wish you wouldn't ride when you're drinking."

"You quit worryin' about me, gal," the rancher said airily. "I been takin' care of myself for nearly fifty years. I'm

danged tired of that young bull wanderin' off into the thickets and gettin' lost, I aim to put a bell on him. I'll be back by sundown."

But he wasn't. She never saw him alive again. . . .

Beyond a screening belt of timber Jim Coffee halted, took the bottle from his pocket and drank deeply. He shivered, pocketed the bottle, and rode on. He had been drinking a lot since the death of his wife three years before. The whisky didn't drive the dark loneliness from his mind, but it made it more bearable.

As he rode, Jim Coffee's tired eyes regarded his surroundings with keen appreciation. This was the Big Bend section of Southwest Texas, a world in itself—a strange, lost land, a raw, crude land appalling in its tremendous isolation and loneliness, yet incredibly beautiful and inviting. On three sides of this fertile valley towered the mighty ramparts of the Chisos Mountains—Ghost Mountains—lifting darkly against the blue sky, ancient and hostile, guarding jealously their secret hoards of hidden treasure.

Here in this section of mighty Texas were incredible contrasts: Fertile basins that were slashed by clear rushing streams; flat, heat-seared desertland; mountain masses, crouched like sullen, grotesque prehistoric monsters. There were spots inhabited only by the rattler and the lizard, while a few miles away there was game in abundance—deer, mountain lion, bear, wild turkey and peccary.

JIM COFFEE had been among the first settlers in this section of the state, coming here from the Big Thickets of deep East Texas. He loved the land and its people, its deserts and mountains and lush grasslands, and knew many of its secrets.

On the southern portion of Coffee's range the grassland merged with dense, thorny thickets. As a rule, cattle avoided these thickets. But Coffee had a young pure blood bull which, for some queer reason, liked them. He was forever wandering into the thickets, luring other cattle with him, coming out days later gaunt and thirsty. Jim Coffee had decided to tie a bell about the young bull's neck so he could be located more easily.

He drank again from the half-empty bottle, and rode along the edge of the thickets looking for the fiddle-footed bull. A mule deer crashed off through the thickets; a black bear shambled from behind a clump of Spanish dagger and stood regarding him curiously. But the bull remained elusive. The sun sank lower, setting the crests of the peaks afire with golden flame.

Several riders spurred suddenly from a screening thicket and drove straight at Jim Coffee. They were roughly-dressed, evil-faced, and they had guns in their hands. At their head was a burly blond man with pale eyes and a beaklike nose that curved over a steel-trap mouth.

"Pull up, Coffee!" the blond man ordered harshly. "And keep yore hand away from that hogleg if yuh want to live!"

Jim Coffee jerked his roan to a halt. Blank-eyed with surprise, he stared at the cold-eyed riders as they surrounded him. One of them snaked his gun from its holster.

"You jiggers been eatin' loco weed?" Jim Coffee said, genuinely puzzled. "I got no *dinero* on me."

"We're not after money," snapped the blond man.

"Then what yuh want?"

"We want to hear yuh do some talkin'."

Half-drunk, the rancher grinned. "Shore," he said, "I like to talk. But what about?"

"About the jewels of Quetzalcoatl!"

Jim Coffee started. He quit grinning, looking carefully at the hard-faced men who hemmed him in, and a sly veil of secrecy seemed to slide over his eyes. Certain knowledge of the deadly peril he was in drained the color from his face.

"Don't reckon I get yuh," he said finally.

"You get me, all right! You know who I am, old man?"

"Yeah, I know who yuh are," Jim Cof-

fee said recklessly. "Yuh're Lash Burma, leader of one of the plumb meanest bunch of cutthroat buzzards in Texas. Any man in yore crew would cut out a woman's heart and laugh about it. And I still don't *sabe* what yuh're talkin' about."

"And I say yuh're lyin'!" "Lash" Burma snarled. "But I'm glad yuh know who we are, because now yuh know we won't stand for any foolishness. Yuh'll tell us what we want to know, or we'll make yuh crawl and beg for a bullet between the eyes!"

"But I tell yuh I don't know anything about this jewels of—whatever it was yuh said," Coffee said desperately. "I never heard of any such!"

One of the riders leaned forward without speaking and hit the rancher, smashing him from the saddle.

Half-stunned, Coffee rolled over and clawed to his knees, staring with dazed and furious eyes up at the man who had hit him and who now sat humped in the saddle and grinned wickedly down at Jim Coffee. This man was huge, incredibly broad and powerful-looking, with evil and cruelty emanating from him like a bad odor. His face was broad, almost black, slashed by thick, down-curling lips and pitted with hooded black eyes that seethed with animal hate and brutality and violence.

JIM HATFIELD

Jim Coffee had never before seen this beastlike man, but he knew him from pictures he had seen on reward flyers. His name was Nick Sabot, a name synonymous with viciousness and death over a big part of Texas. As other men loved a woman or good whisky, folks said Nick Sabot took sadistic pleasure from inflicting pain and death. It was like a virulent poison in his heart and blood. Sabot was slow-witted, but deadly as a mad grizzly.

"Let me have 'im, Boss," Nick Sabot growled. "I'll make 'im talk!"

"Mebbe later, Nick," Burma drawled. "He couldn't talk with his throat torn out.

We'll give him his chance first. Get up, old man!"

COFFEE got slowly to his feet. His face was gray with the dismal certainty of his doom, and blood trickled from a corner of his mouth, but his squinty eyes showed no fear.

"What you coyotes aim to do with me?" he asked hoarsely.

Lash Burma grinned wickedly. "Mebbe we'll roast yuh at the stake, slow, Apache style. Mebbe we'll bury yuh in the sand, close to an ant hill, with just yore head stickin' out, and pour molasses over yore head. First, though, I aim to find out how long yuh can stand on yore tiptoes with one end of a rope about yore neck and the other over a cottonwood limb."

"Yuh're a yeller dog, Burma!" Coffee said harshly.

"But a live one! You'll talk. Get onto that hoss!"

Coffee knew that argument or resistance would be futile. He slid a foot into a stirrup and swung into saddle. As he hit the saddle, he exploded into action with a speed that was amazing in a man of his age.

Simultaneously, he slammed spurs to the rangy roan, and rammed a hand up under his *charro* jacket. The hand came out clutching the quart whisky bottle. The roan grunted, lunged forward. The bottle arced, and at the end of Coffee's full-armed swing crashed against Nick Sabot's massive head.

Sabot bellowed with bull-like fury and pain as the bottle shattered against his head and drenched him with whisky. The roan drove against Burma's mount, smashing it into a couple of others. The surprised renegades yelled and fought their rearing, wheeling mounts.

Jim Coffee had broken clear of his captors, was spurring frantically toward the nearby screening thicket, hugging the roan's neck. A gun blasted. The rancher shivered, reeled in the saddle and almost fell, but grabbed the saddle-horn with one hand and clung to it. He flung a bitter, despairing glance back at the milling outlaws.

"Don't kill him, yuh blunderin' fools!" Lash Burma screamed. "He's worth a king's ransom, alive. After him—don't let 'im get away!"

But the racing roan and its rider had already vanished into the thicket. They could hear the animal's progress as it slammed and crashed its way through the thorny branches and undergrowth.

"Run him down!" raged the blond outlaw leader. "If he gets away it'll be our last chance at him. He's bad hurt—he won't get far!"

CHAPTER II

Bell of Doom

WITH a dull despair Jim Coffee realized that he was badly hurt. The bullet had hit him in the back, down low, and slashed through his side. His entire body felt numb, and he could feel blood running down his side and leg.

He clung to the saddle-horn and the roan's mane, and let the animal run. The thorny branches tore and mauled at him. He couldn't hear the outlaws behind him, but he knew they would be there, after him like a blood-hungry wolf pack.

He left the dense thicket, raced along a narrow meadow, then sought the shelter of a rocky ravine. The roan slowed its headlong pace. A purplish mist clouded the rancher's mind now. This whole thing seemed like a ghastly nightmare. But he knew it was real and deadly.

The mist deepened in his brain and he lost all sense of time and distance. He had a feeling of moving through a weird half-world of gargoylish shadows. Once he thought he heard men shouting, and the roar of guns. Then, for a space of time, he heard nothing and felt nothing.

Afterward, he knew it was night. He didn't know where he was, but he could feel the branches of trees brushing against his face, could hear the slog of the roan's hoofs against soft earth. Occasionally he glimpsed the cold gleam of stars above.

Then, suddenly, the sun was shining in his face. He lay face up on the ground. He didn't remember falling from the saddle, but here he was, and he was cold and stiff.

Jim Coffee lay still a moment, thinking

The big sorrel soared over the six-foot-high poles with inches to spare (CHAP. XI)

about this. Slowly then, fighting the savage pain that seemed to shroud him like a red blanket, he rolled over and stared about.

The sun was low on the horizon. But it was the eastern horizon, and with a little shock he realized that this was morning. There was no way of knowing how long he had been lying here, or how far he had stumbled and crawled after falling off the roan—or had he been shot from the saddle?—in his wild efforts to escape Lash Burma's cutthroats.

Jim Coffee forced himself to consider his predicament calmly. He knew where he was now—on the extreme northern boundary of his Circle 3 outfit, several miles from the spot where he had escaped from Burma's gang. It was an isolated and desolate place. The chances of his being found here, before it was too late, were remote.

And he knew, with certainty, that he could never walk away from here. Maybe, if he'd had attention directly after he was shot, he would have had a chance, but not now. He might live an hour, two hours, possibly even half a dozen. But he was the same as dead.

He accepted this with bitterness. The secret that had brought him to this would die with him.

A hissing, croaking sound nearby made him turn his head. Fifty feet away was a dead tree, its leafless limbs outthrust like bony arms in entreaty. Huddled in a row on one of these limbs were several buzzards. The vultures were regarding him with reddish, greedy eyes, quarreling harshly among themselves.

They were, Coffee realized, waiting for him to die, and his first reaction was that of furious anger. He tried to rise to his knees, to lift a rock from the ground and fling it at the buzzards, and failing croaked bitter curses at them.

The buzzards shuffled awkwardly along the limb, flapping their wings and hissing angrily at him, but remained in the tree. They knew it was only a question of waiting.

Coffee lay back and watched the buzzards through half-closed lids. He would be found, all right, this very day. Burma's wolves would be scouring the range for him. They knew he was wounded, and they wouldn't give up, because there was too much at stake. They would be frantically beating the thickets and timber and grasslands.

The buzzards were quieter now, only stirring occasionally with impatience as they watched him. They wouldn't leave the limb until convinced that he was dead.

STEALTHILY, tortured by each movement, Coffee took from his jacket pocket the tiny silver bell and the length of strong cord and placed them on the ground beside him. He found a stubby pencil, and tore a leaf from a tally book. When he finished, minutes later, the paper was stained with his life's blood.

But he'd written what he wanted to write.

He lay very still then, thoroughly exhausted, barely conscious. His face was turned toward the buzzards, his eyes closed. The sun was bright and hot on his face, and thirst was like a giant hand clutching at his throat. He forced himself to lie utterly still, to keep his eyes closed, hoping desperately that he could retain consciousness long enough to do what needed to be done.

He could see nothing, hear nothing except the loathsome quarreling of the vultures. He felt no pain, only a numbness. He seemed to be drifting endlessly through a weird, shadowy world. He might have lain there five minutes, or five hours.

He didn't know when the buzzards left the limb, one by one, and flapped down to the earth a few feet from him.

But suddenly he realized that they were there. He could hear them, and he could smell their nauseating stench. He opened his eyes the barest fraction. The buzzards were no more than five feet away, huddled together, croaking excitedly as they peered at him. Arguing, the rancher thought bitterly, over whether he was dead.

He closed his eyes again, barely breathing. He could feel huge red ants making fiery paths over his body. He was weak, so weak he wasn't certain he could move even a finger.

Eons of time seemed to pass. Jim Coffee fought to retain his senses. He knew that the buzzards had waddled closer. Their stench was stronger, their

hissing seemed only inches way. His gorge rose with the expected feel of their curved beaks slashing at his flesh and eyes.

Suddenly his hand shot out. His fingers fastened about the rough, scaly leg of one of the buzzards.

The vulture squawked harshly and struggled violently to escape, beating the earth wildly with its powerful wings. The remaining buzzards were thrown into confusion, flapping and tumbling awkwardly about on the ground for a moment before beating their way heavily into the air.

Jim Coffee clung with the desperate determination of a dying man to the vulture's leg. Slowly, inch by inch, he drew the croaking, struggling buzzard in toward him. He felt the raking talons of the bird, the slashing stab of its curved beak, the furious pounding of its pinions.

But he held on, and gradually he pulled the buzzard in until it lay partly under his body. Sensing its helplessness, then, the buzzard stopped struggling.

With fumbling, stiff fingers he wrapped the piece of paper tightly about the buzzard's leg, tying it securely with a length of the cord. With another piece of cord, he fastened the small silver bell about the vulture's neck.

Then, with what he knew was the last of his strength, he rolled over onto his back. The buzzard flapped a few feet away from him, where it huddled with beak agape and peered at him.

Jim Coffee didn't see the two riders who appeared suddenly atop a low rise fifty yards away. He didn't hear their quick, savage shouts of triumph as they spurred down the decline and flung themselves from saddles.

As the riders raced down the decline, the belled buzzard had taken half a dozen waddling steps and flapped into the air.

Lash Burma stooped over the still figure of Jim Coffee, and straightened almost instantly, his face contorted with rage.

"He's dead!" Burma snarled. "And I saw him move just as we came over that rise."

"He was doin' somethin' with that cussed buzzard he had caught," declared the other renegade. "What's that tinklin' noise? Sounds like a bell!"

Lash Burma stared upward at the buzzard that was beating its way steadily higher into the air.

"It *is* a bell," he spat harshly. "And it's tied to that buzzard. I got an idea somethin' else is tied to it, too—what we wanted Jim Coffee to tell us!"

He jerked out his gun and emptied it wildly into the sun-painted sky. But the buzzard flapped higher and higher, the tinkling sound of the bell gradually fading.

CHAPTER III

Whiplash Law

TEXAS Ranger Jim Hatfield, on his great golden sorrel, Goldy, rode slowly along the dim trail that led to the town of Perdida, and gazed over the rough country about him, puzzled. For the last several moments he had been vaguely aware of a queer sound—a tinkling, musical sound like the chiming of a silver bell.

At first, deep in thought, he had considered it his imagination, a part of the magic Texas sunshine and the soft breeze that blew down from the frowning peaks. Or perhaps a belled steer or cow. But now, as the tinkling sound faded, only to grow stronger, he knew that it was neither.

He was not given to hallucinations—and a steer or cow wouldn't trail him through the malpais.

Hatfield, known over much of mighty Texas as the Lone Wolf Ranger, stopped the sorrel and sat slouched in the saddle with his dark head on one side, listening. The sound was barely audible now, but unmistakable. He couldn't even tell from which direction it came. But it was, without doubt, a bell.

Now, there was nothing unusual about a bell. But it was the way the chimes had seemed to follow him, the way they came and went, that intrigued Jim Hatfield. He knew that grim mystery, even death, hovered over this wild, tough section of Texas between the Pecos and Rio Grande Rivers. And he was in the immediate section from which the urgent

call for aid had come.

Slowly the alert, grayish-green eyes of the tall Ranger probed the encircling landscape. To the south and west gaunt, scowling mountain peaks jutted against the blue sky; to the east and north were low, timbered hills. He had been riding along a meadow that was hemmed in by giant oaks and slender pine trees, with brownish cliffs rearing at one end.

The meadow was a riot of color—giant yucca, sunflowers and poppies, spread before him like a fantastic, many-colored blanket—while the gaunt, snakelike limbs of the ocotillo plants writhed weirdly across the scarred faces of the cliffs.

A lone buzzard circled high in the sky, craning its scrawny neck to peer down at the rider.

Jim Hatfield shook his head frowningly. Seemingly the thin tinkling sound came from none of these directions. There was something weird, unreal about it. The Lone Wolf lifted his gaze to the mountains whose jagged crests were shrouded in a grayish mist. Chisos—Ghost Mountains—and the Indians and Mexicans swore they were haunted by the spirits of men long dead.

Hatfield shrugged powerful shoulder, gathered up the reins. Ahead of him, waiting to be solved, was a mystery more sinister than the mere tinkling of a bell.

Then Jim Hatfield paused abruptly, his gaze again jerking upward. The buzzard still circled leisurely, above and slightly to his right. He focused his entire attention on this vulture.

And sudden realization slapped at the Ranger. The tinkling sound came from *above!*

Hatfield knew then why the sound had seemed to follow him. Because the buzzard had, after the manner of buzzards, been following him. He knew that the bell, although he couldn't see it from this distance, was tied to the vulture.

The buzzard was drifting away now, and the melodious tinkling gradually faded as the bird became a black dot against the blue.

The tall Ranger shook his head, more puzzled, and rode on. A belled buzzard was a queer thing, but many queer things happened in this wild Texas that still rocked and seethed from the red havoc of Civil War. Hatfield put the vulture from his mind, remembering what had brought him here.

SEVERAL days before, crusty old Captain Bill McDowell, Chief of the Texas Rangers in Austin, had called Jim Hatfield into his office.

"Get ready to ride, Jim," he had growled, jabbing angrily with a pencil at a letter on the desk before him. "Blazin' Hades has broke loose down in the Big Bend. An old saddle pard of mine, named Jim Coffee, has been killed, and I want yuh to get down there and put hemp neckties about the gizzards of the skunks that done it!"

"Shore," Hatfield had agreed lazily, grinning covertly at the peppery old Ranger Captain's rage. "Who done it, and why?"

"If I knowed them things, I wouldn't be sendin' you down there!" McDowell had snapped testily. "This letter here is from Jim Coffee's daughter, Nan. She was just a baby last time I saw her. But that was twenty years ago, so I guess she's changed a mite by now. She says her dad was found dead out on the range, killed. She don't know who done it, but"—he had squinted at the letter—"it says here, ' . . . I suspect that Father's death is in some way connected with the vampire god and the jewels of Quetzalcoatl. I think I am in danger, and possibly others. . . .' Sounds loco to me. What you make of it, Jim?"

Jim Hatfield had leaned suddenly forward, his greenish eyes quickening with interest.

"Accordin' to legend," he had said, "Quetzalcoatl was a god worshiped by the ancient Aztecs in Mexico. They went through some kind of crazy rituals before a golden image of this god, and offered up human sacrifices to it. Quetzalcoatl was called the vampire god because he was supposed to live on the blood of these victims."

"Hogwash!" the old Ranger had exploded, slapping the desk with a calloused palm. "Folks don't believe such poppycock these days!"

"Mebbe they don't," Hatfield had agreed quietly. "But the Aztecs did. They sacrificed members of their own tribes to it, mostly young girls, and killed any stranger who dared invade the god's

privacy. The Aztecs were a highly intelligent race, but a savage, barbaric race too. A lot of their beliefs and rituals still exist among their descendants down there, I hear."

Captain McDowell had stared. "Yuh mean yuh believe such tripe?"

"Mebbe I wouldn't, if I hadn't been down there, if I hadn't seen a few things with my own eyes."

"By godfrey, mebbe . . . But what about these jewels of Quetzalcoatl? And why would some heathen Aztec god be pullin' shenannigans up here in Texas?"

"I don't know," Jim Hatfield had admitted. "I reckon it'll be part of my job to find out about that."

"It shore as tunket will! If it wasn't for this cussed rheumatism I'd hit leather and burn wind down there with yuh. Vampires, gods or just plain polecats, they can't salt an old saddlemate of mine and still breathe through their gullets! Anyway, Jim, you light a shuck down there to Perdida. See Nan Coffee and she'll give yuh the particulars. When can yuh start?"

Hatfield had abruptly risen to his feet, his lazy indolence seeming to fall like a mantle from his stalwart, six-foot-four body, an eager light of battle glowing in his strange eyes. He always chafed at inaction. Swift conflict was to him as food and drink were to other men.

Halfway to the door, he had clipped, "Soon as I saddle Goldy."

"*Bueno!* Just a minute, though." Then, as Hatfield had paused, McDowell had gone on, "Sheriff at Perdida is a gent named Ben Raven. Far as I know he's square, but use yore own judgment about tellin' him who yuh are and why yuh're there. Prosecutin' attorney is a young jigger name of Bourke Prine. I knew young Prine's dad, Dave Prine, and he saved my bacon in El Paso once. Dave Prine's boy is bound to be ace-high, so mebbe it'd be a good idea to look Bourke Prine up and have a talk with him."

"I'll do that," the Lone Wolf had promised, and had gone on out.

Twenty minutes later he had ridden out of Austin, a towering figure who sat the saddle with an easy grace. He wore dark trousers and dark shirt and half-boots. On each of his thighs rode a black-

Hatfield snaked his Colts over the edge of the pedestal and their snarling thunder slammed over the cavern (CHAP. XIX)

butted Colt, tied down with rawhide thongs.

His rugged features were burned a deep bronze by sun and wind. His arms were long and powerful, his fingers slender and strong as steel cables. His eyes, usually gentle and good-natured, could turn instantly to the bleak sheen of glacier ice when he was angered.

FAST and deadly with six-gun or rifle, expert at rough-and-tumble, there was not a more dangerous fighter in all of Texas than Jim Hatfield. With reckless courage, backed by bludgeoning fists and the two lightning-fast guns, he had instilled fear and respect for Ranger law in the hearts of lawbreakers from the windswept Panhandle to the Gulf, from the Rio Grande to the Big Thickets of deep East Texas.

Whenever Captain Bill McDowell had an especially tough or dangerous job, he always called in the Lone Wolf. And Jim Hatfield had never failed him.

Now, riding the trail toward Perdida, Hatfield suddenly tensed in the saddle. The golden sorrel had shivered, stopped, his nostrils flaring as he turned his glossy head to stare into a belt of timber to Hatfield's right.

At the same instant, two new sounds cut like whiplashes through the air—a horse's nicker, and the shrill, terror-filled scream of a woman!

The sounds, perhaps a hundred yards away, had come from the timber or beyond it.

A quick pressure of Hatfield's knees sent the sorrel into a thicket beside the trail. He leaped to the ground, letting the reins drag, and snatched a carbine from a saddle-boot. Then, with a soothing word to the motionless sorrel, he recrossed the weed-grown trail, gained a line of cedars and went at a crouching run toward the timber.

Gaining the deep shadows of the oaks, he paused again to listen and get his bearings. The woman had not screamed again. Except for the harsh scolding of a blue-jay, a deep, eerie silence lay over the vicinity.

But the Lone Wolf was not fooled. He knew that a woman didn't scream out in wild fear or pain without reason.

Then, startlingly close, a man's venomous voice snarled:

"Go ahead, Nick! If that don't make her talk, mebbe we'll give her a taste of the same!"

Instantly there was a sharp, hissing sound, followed by the pain-filled groan of a man.

The hair lifted at the back of Jim Hatfield's neck, and quick, wicked anger slashed at him. It wasn't the first time he had heard the snarling hiss of a whip as it cut through the air and bit into human flesh.

With the stealthy, silent stalk of a great cougar he went forward through the dense timber, those sinister sounds echoing in his ears. He heard a man laugh, a low, brutal sound, and heard the sobbing of a woman.

He crouched in another cedar thicket, at the top of a decline that sloped sharply down into a bowl-shaped depression. The decline was studded with boulders and stunted bushes. At the bottom of the sink was a cluster of gaunt oak trees, among which were tethered six saddled horses.

But it was a stir of activity fifty feet from the tethered horses that riveted the Ranger's cold-eyed gaze. Six people were in the group there. Four of them were roughly-dressed, gun-belted, with vicious, cruel faces.

One of these four was a burly blond man with pale eyes and a beaklike nose. Another was incredibly huge, with broad, dark features and down-curling lips, with pitted, hooded eyes that boiled with animal cruelty and violence. The two others were bearded, stamped with the harsh brand of the out-trails.

On the ground, her back to the bole of a pine, her wrists and ankles bound with strips of rope, sat a beautiful, yellow-haired girl. The girl was sobbing, fear and horror in her wide blue eyes as she watched the scene before her.

Ten feet from the girl was an oak tree, and lashed to this tree, his muscular arms drawn forward about its trunk and tied on the opposite side, was a tall, dark-haired young man. The young man was shirtless, and his bare back was laced with livid welts. Sweat trickled over his handsome face, but his lips were set in grim determination.

The dark giant with the hooded eyes

held a keen-lashed blacksnake whip in one hand, and the muscles in his hairy arms writhed and bulged as he wielded the whip with slow, deliberate savagery. The lash made a wicked, snarling sound as it slashed across the quivering flesh of the bound man's back. The young fellow's tall body jerked violently with each blow, but no sound came from his lips.

SAVAGE, killing anger stormed through Jim Hatfield. He didn't know what this was about, but he knew it had to be stopped. He eased himself to one side, so that he lay prone behind the dead trunk of a fallen tree.

"Stop it, you—you black-hearted beasts!" he heard the girl cry out.

The blond man lifted a hand. "All right, Nick," he said, and when the snarling giant let the whip trail in the dust and stood planted on columnar legs, the leader turned to the girl, grinning. "Shore, lady, we'll stop," he said. "We don't want to hurt anybody. You ready to tell us what we want to know?"

"I can't!" The girl's eyes were stricken, pleading. "If I could I'd tell you *anything* to make you stop!"

"You can, all right. Yore dad knew, and it don't make sense he wouldn't tell you."

"He didn't! But if you think I know, why not whip *me?*"

The blond man laughed sneeringly, shook his head.

"We can do that, too, if we have to. But we knew yuh was in love with this jigger. We figgered yuh'd rather talk than watch him be cut into piggin' strings!"

"But I can't, I tell you! If I--"

The pale-eyed man snarled an oath, whirled back to the dark-faced giant.

"He's yores, Nick! You like blood, you like to tear men to pieces and watch 'em die slow and hard. Go to it!"

The dark giant laughed. The lash hissed and screamed as it uncoiled like a striking snake. Jim Hatfield's rifle blasted lead-fanged flame.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

TROUBLE ON THE TRINITY

BY JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER IV

Loot of the Vampire

AS THE rifle crashed, the giant's huge arm, already driving forward to slash the whip across the bound man's back, wavered and jerked downward. The lash curled about the prisoner's boots.

The giant snarled an oath, slapping at his cheek with his other hand. He lowered the hand, staring with stunned surprise at the blood on it.

Hatfield had placed the bullet exactly where he wanted it, slashing a shallow groove across the big man's cheek. He never killed unless he had to, not even now, and despite the rage that now seethed inside him.

The three other outlaws had whirled, startled surprise making its pattern across their cruel faces as they stared upward toward the cedar screen that concealed Hatfield. The Ranger knew they couldn't see him, but they could see the smoke that curled out of the cedars. He knew that if they chose to fight he would be up against tough odds.

"I'm takin' cards in this shindig, gents!" he called out in a chill, ringing voice. "Not knowin' what this is all about, I'm givin' you buzzards a chance to ride out, if yuh do it quick. Yuh got just five seconds to start movin'!"

His voice revealed his exact location to the four. Their hot eyes riveted on that spot.

"There he is, in them cedars!" the blond man spat. "Let him have it, you gunnies!"

He grabbed for his own gun, an action followed by two of his henchmen. The slow-witted giant, still puzzled, rubbed at his bleeding cheek. One of the gunmen, a squat, swarthy man, whirled and leaped toward the tree to which the prisoner was bound, with the obvious intention of using the young man's body as a shield.

Hatfield's rifle roared again, and the swarthy man tumbled headlong, slamming face-down against the ground.

Two guns were blazing and brawling

down there in the sink now. The bullets snarled waspishly about Hatfield, showering him with cedar needles, slashing into the rotten log behind which he huddled. Grim-eyed, he snaked his carbine forward again.

As it bellowed, another of the gunmen, slender, red-haired, stumbled and fell sideward to the ground. But he clawed to his feet again, a wild fear showing on his face as he stared upward toward the unseen rifleman.

"I ain't standin' here to be slaughtered by somebody I can't see!" he yelled, and scuttled like a giant crab on his wounded leg toward the horses.

The leader flung bitter curses after his fleeing henchman, and at the dark-faced giant, but lowered his own gun and stood with uncertainty staining his face. Hatfield placed a bullet directly between the blond man's feet, and another an inch from his ear.

The outlaw leader swore bitterly, and ducked. He flung a glance at the still figure on the ground, yelled something at the giant, wheeled, and ran toward the horses. The big brute followed him with great, animal-like leaps, showing Hatfield a broad, wicked face that was made all the more brutal by the grin distorting it.

Filled with revulsion, the Ranger lined his sights on that leaping, bearlike figure. But at the last instant, unable to shoot down even a man like that in cold blood, he jerked the muzzle downward and the bullet plowed into the earth at the giant's feet. His carbine empty, he jerked out the twin black Colts and sprayed the cluster of trees with lead from them.

The outlaws, thrown into complete panic now by the cold deliberateness of the Lone Wolf's attack, leaped into saddles, rammed steel to their mounts and fled headlong up the far side of the sink. They vanished into the timber that rimmed the depression, bent low in saddles and quirting their horses.

Jim Hatfield leaped to his feet and raced down the decline. The girl, unable to rise, had wisely flattened herself against the ground and lain motionless during the fight. Now she rolled over and sat up, and both she and the bound man wonderingly watched the leaping figure of the big Ranger as he came toward them.

Without speaking, he drew a keen-bladed knife and slashed the girl's bonds. Then he released the young fellow. The man, his back slashed and bloody, stumbled slightly as the ropes were cut, and Hatfield steadied him with a big hand.

"Whoever you are, feller," the dark-haired man said huskily, "we owe yuh plenty, and I'm—"

HATFIELD stopped him with a gesture.

"That can wait. Them buzzards might get back their nerve and decide to circle back. Let's get up into the timber."

They hurried up the slope toward the spot where Hatfield had left his empty carbine, the Ranger assisting both the girl and the young man. Retrieving his rifle, he led the two deeper into the timber, to a spot where their position would be more advantageous in case the gunmen decided to renew the fight.

Hatfield considered this unlikely, however, which proved correct. As they crouched there in the thicket, the tall Ranger gave no sign that he was aware of the minute, almost suspicious scrutiny of the two he had rescued. The man, angry, sore in body and spirit from the treatment he had received, seemed especially suspicious.

Sure finally that they were safe, Hatfield turned to the two with an infectious grin. The girl, he saw, was possibly twenty-one, and amazingly pretty. The man had straightforward, honest eyes. The Ranger liked his looks immediately.

"Now we can talk, if yuh feel like it," he said. "My name's Hatfield."

"Mine's Raven," the tall young man said curtly. "Sheriff Ben Raven, of Perdida. This is Nan Coffee, the lady I am to marry."

Carefully concealing his shock of surprise, Hatfield shook hands with the young sheriff, and bowed to the girl.

"Like I said, Hatfield," Raven went on, "whatever yore reason for mixin' in that ruckus, we're plenty obliged to yuh."

"Forget it," Hatfield said, and asked the girl, "Yuh're Jim Coffee's daughter?"

She looked sharply at him. "Why, yes, I am. Why?"

The Lone Wolf was as quick in making a decision as he was with fists or gun. He already had Ben Raven placed as a

square-shooter. From a hidden pocket inside his shirt he took his Ranger badge —a silver star on a silver circle—and held it in his palm for them to see.

"A Ranger, by the blue blazes!" Ben Raven exclaimed, genuinely surprised. "That explains the easy way yuh dusted off Lash Burma's owlhooters."

"Surprise is a big advantage," Hatfield disclaimed. "And seein' one of their pards killed sort of panicked 'em."

He hadn't taken time to examine the sprawled figure down there in the sink. It hadn't been necessary. He knew exactly where that bullet of his had gone.

"You must have come in answer to the letter I wrote Captain McDowell in Austin," Nan Coffee said suddenly.

"That's right. Captain Bill was an old friend of yore father."

"But, Nan," Raven said, "yuh never told me yuh'd written to the Rangers."

"I meant to, Ben, but I just never could think of it when we were together. And I thought, you being so well-known here, a Ranger might be able to work undercover and have better luck finding whoever it was that killed my father."

"Yuh're right, of course," the sheriff agreed. "I thought of writin' 'em myself. . . . Ranger, as yuh just saw, yuh nearly got here too late to help Nan."

"I'm afraid so," Hatfield agreed soberly. "Yuh mentioned Lash Burma a moment ago. Who—and what—is he?"

"The blond buzzard yuh saw was him. He's leader of a gang of cutthroats that range over a big part of the Big Bend. They have a hideout somewheres in the mountains above here. The dirty son handlin' the whip was Nick Sabot. That's the kind of work he likes. Some day I'll get my sights lined on his black heart!"

"Ben and I were out riding this afternoon." Nan Coffee spoke quietly. She had regained her composure, and Hatfield realized now that her fear had been caused solely by the young sheriff's peril. "We had no idea those—outlaws—were within miles of us, until they rode suddenly from a thicket and took us prisoner. We didn't have a chance. They carried us to that sink, tied Ben up and started whipping him."

"Why?"

"Because they thought, by torturing Ben, they could make me give them some information they wanted. I couldn't tell them what they wanted to know, but they wouldn't believe me."

Although he thought he knew the answer, Hatfield asked, "What did they want to know about?"

"The jewels of Quetzalcoatl!"

"Miss Coffee," Hatfield said slowly, earnestly, "I want yuh to tell me about this. And if I'm to help yuh, yuh mustn't hold anything back."

"I won't," she agreed readily. "Although I know what I'm going to tell you will sound crazy, fantastic, and I don't expect you to believe me."

"I'll believe yuh. I've heard of the ancient Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl. But I want yuh to tell me all yuh know about it."

AS SHE hesitated, glancing at Ben Raven, the tall young sheriff moved closer and slid an arm about her. Sitting thus, and looking straight at Hatfield, she spoke in a low, clear voice, a faraway look in her blue eyes as if she

[*Turn page*]

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were seeing over unimaginable distances.

"Quetzalcoatl was—may still be—a god worshipped by the Aztecs in Mexico. Golden images of him were set up in their temples, and weird rituals were held in its presence, for they believed that this god held over them the powers of peace or prosperity, even of life or death itself. If droughts came, or floods, or death, they believed that Quetzalcoatl was displeased. Then, on an altar before the image, human sacrifices—usually young and beautiful maidens—were offered to appease its wrath.

"They believed that Quetzalcoatl grew angry only when he was hungry, and that his only food was the blood of the victims offered him in appeasement. So the victims considered it a high honor to be sacrificed. And because he supposedly existed on the blood of humans, Quetzalcoatl came to be known as the vampire god. Is that the way you heard the legend, Hatfield?"

The Ranger nodded. "Yes. What I don't know is the part this Aztec god is supposed to play in yore father's death."

"Almost a century ago," Nan Coffee went on, "a party of American adventurers are supposed to have organized an expedition into Mexico. They made their way to an Aztec temple on the shores of the jungle-hemmed Lake Tezcuco. In a ruthless attack they slaughtered many Aztecs, and made off with a huge golden image of the sacred god Quetzalcoatl. Legend has it that this idol, several times the size of a man, was filled with precious jewels and stones.

"Anyway, a war party of Aztecs trailed the raiders up out of Mexico. After crossing the Rio Grande—supposedly in this immediate vicinity—they came up with the Americans, and in a surprise attack killed some of the raiders and retook the idol. However, the Americans regrouped and pursued the Aztecs who, slowed by the heavy idol, took refuge in the fortresslike *hacienda* of a Spaniard named Don Salzabar. I'll tell you about this Don Salzabar and his *rancho* in a few moments.

"There was a terrible fight between the American raiders and the cornered Aztecs, and the Aztecs were wiped out. The raiders discovered that the cornered Aztecs had killed to the last man, woman and child Don Salzabar's family and servants. The golden image of Quetzalcoatl, with its rich treasure, had vanished. So far as is known it was never found. And that is the end of that part of the story."

"Not quite," Sheriff Ben Raven objected. "Tell him about old Maxtla and his followers."

"Oh, yes," Nan agreed. "A few years after the Aztecs were killed, a strange party of Indians appeared in the Big Bend. It was rumored that they were Aztecs from Lake Tezcuco in search of their lost god Quetzalcoatl, although this was never proved. This strange tribe lingered through the years, intermarrying with the Apaches.

"Their village remains until this day, in the foothills near Mantox Canyon a few miles to the west of here on what is now Circle Three land. The ruins of Don Salzabar's old *hacienda* are just inside Mantox Canyon. The leader of the descendants of this strange tribe is a very old man named Maxtla. They keep to themselves and don't like strangers. Nobody ever knew whether they really were Aztecs or where they came from."

CHAPTER V

Perdida

JIM Hatfield had listened with intense interest to the girl's recital. Aside from its bearing on the present case, he was deeply interested in Aztec lore and had studied it extensively. He knew it was entirely possible, even probable, that the story Nan Coffee had recounted was true.

"About this *hacienda* where the Aztecs were wiped out and the idol disappeared," he murmured.

"The *hacienda* is on the eastern fringe of what was a huge *rancho,* part of a Spanish grant awarded Don Salzabar," Nan said. "The don was a tyrant, a wicked man who had grown rich on loot he had taken from Sonora missions—but that is not important now. As I say, the ruins are still there, deserted except for bats and snakes. The Indians and Mexicans call it *El Rancho de Sambres*—

Ranch of Ghosts—and with good reason, I'd say. It's a weird, shivery place, especially at night. Have I bored you with all this?"

"Far from it," the Lone Wolf declared emphatically. "Anyway, I've got a hunch it has a direct bearin' on what's happened right lately."

"Yes, it has!" Nan exclaimed. "That heathen god, I'm convinced, brought Father to his death. After Mother died three years ago, Father took to drinking. And sometimes, when he had a lot, he was reckless and talked too much. It was that way one night about two months ago in the Sapphire Saloon in Perdida." Nan Coffee looked up at the young sheriff. "You were in the Sapphire that night, Ben. You tell how it was."

"I was there, standin' close beside Jim Coffee," Raven agreed slowly, "when he took this queer-lookin' doo-dad from his pocket and placed it on the bar. I'd never seen anything like it before, but it was plain enough it was some kind of a piece of jewelry. The saloon was crowded, and at least fifty men saw the thing. Coffee was pretty drunk and he bragged some. He said he knew where there was plenty more like it, and he said somethin' about what sounded like Quetzalcoatl. I remember somebody said, 'By gosh, that's a piece of old Aztec jewelry! Where'd yuh find it?' But Jim Coffee kind of closed up then and put the thing back in his pocket, and he wouldn't talk about it any more."

"He never would," Nan declared. "I heard about it, and asked him about it. He was sober then and denied the whole thing, but he acted so queerly after that—like he was frightened—that I was sure he was lying. Then one afternoon about three weeks ago Father left the ranch with a small bell in his pocket which he intended to tie about the neck of a bull that was always getting lost in the thickets.

"He didn't come back, and late the next day I found him on our north range—dead. He'd been shot in the back. I don't know who killed him, but after what has just happened to Ben and me I'm almost certain it was Lash Burma's gang, and I think it was because they thought he knew the secret of the Aztec jewels."

"Do you think he did?"

"Why—why, I don't know. There was the thing he showed in Perdida and the things he said. And the queer way he acted afterward. I don't know."

Jim Hatfield got to his feet, stretching his mighty muscles.

"Well, I've got somethin' to work on, at least. Sheriff, I may need yore help before this pot of stew is cooked."

"Just give a holler," Ben Raven said promptly. "I've got a few bones to pick with that buzzardly crew!"

"Miss," the ranger said to Nan Coffee soberly, "I'd advise yuh to stay close to the ranch after this. Those owlhooters think yore father had located the Aztec idol and treasure, and they suspect he told you the secret before he was killed."

"He didn't! He wouldn't even talk of it."

"I believe yuh. But that doesn't change the fact that yuh're in danger until this is cleared up. They don't believe yuh."

"I'll see she's protected," Raven promised grimly.

"*Bueno!* Well, let's get yore broncs out of the sink down yonder and hit leather. I'd like to be in Perdida by dark. . . ."

HATFIELD and Raven reached Perdida in the purple shadows of early evening. They had packed the body of the dead outlaw into town on his own horse, after escorting Nan Coffee to the Circle 3. She had staunchly refused to come into town.

After making certain that Goldy received ample grain and water at the livery, Hatfield headed along the plank walk for the town's one hotel. Soft lamplight speared through doorways and windows, making a golden lacework over the dusty street. A low murmur of voices sounded inside the frame buildings, giving to the place a deceptive air of peace and contentment.

The big Ranger's gaze lifted to the frowning mountain battlements that reared black and hostile against the sky. These were more symbolic of the sinister things that were happening on this range.

Hatfield got a room at the hotel, and ate a substantial meal in the hotel dining room. Afterward he went out into the street again, not content to bed down

for the night despite his bone-deep weariness, but anxious to sink his teeth deeper into this mystery that challenged him.

He entered the Sapphire Saloon, the town's biggest and most ornate drinking place. The big room was crowded, with light from the numerous swinging lamps gleaming on the mahogany bar and the garnish furnishings. An arched doorway connected with a dance hall which was noisy with the blare of tinny music and the stamp of booted feet.

"Rye," Hatfield told the chalk-eyed barkeep.

He sipped his drink, broad back to the bar, his greenish eyes probing the room with a deceptive indolence. A couple of poker games were going, while several whooping punchers bucked a roulette wheel. A continuous stream of booted and spurred men migrated from dance hall to bar and back.

"This time of evenin' yuh might find Bourke Prine at the Sapphire," Sheriff Raven had said. "If not, he'll likely be in his office over the bank buildin'. There's an outside stairway."

Bourke Prine, the prosecuting attorney, obviously was not in this room. The Ranger had a detailed description of him. His drink finished, Hatfield strolled across to the arched doorway. The floor of the long dance hall was crowded with booted, roistering punchers who swung short-skirted, overpainted girls recklessly about the place.

A hand touched Hatfield's arm, and a soft voice murmured, "Dance, tall man?"

A remarkably pretty young girl with a red rose in her dark hair stood there smiling invitingly up at the big Ranger. He grinned at her, shook his head, slid a silver dollar into her hand.

"Go buy yoreself a—good feed," he advised, and turned and recrossed the barroom to the street door.

He walked a short distance down the street and climbed the outside stairway of a two-story, white frame building. Light glowed in the windows of a room overlooking the street. At the stairhead was an open door that led into a corridor that was lighted by a wall-bracketed lamp. Beyond this a partly open door let out a brighter shaft of light.

From inside this room Hatfield could hear a murmur of voices, which stopped as his boot thuds paused at the door. As he was about to rap on the door jamb, a smooth, deep voice said:

"Who is it?"

"Gent to see yuh on business."

"All right, come on in."

Hatfield pushed open the door and stepped into a well-lighted, well-furnished room. Two men were seated in padded chairs, one of them behind a broad, flat desk that was littered with papers. This man, whom Hatfield knew instinctively was Bourke Prine, got to his feet as the Ranger entered, while the other remained seated.

Prine was a big, broad-shouldered man with wavy yellow hair and piercing gray eyes. A handsome man, a well-dressed man whose aquiline features showed high intelligence, if not actual brilliance. There was no air of arrogance about him, but rather one of driving ambition and confidence in his own abilities.

His hand-shake was as firm as Hatfield's own.

"Jim Hatfield's my name, suh."

"I'm Bourke Prine. And this is Judge Clagg."

THE Ranger's gaze shifted to the man in the chair. Judge Clagg had a half-empty whisky glass in his hand which he waved airily at Hatfield as he nodded pompously. The Judge was middle-aged, with a paunch which bulged his rusty black broadcloth suit. He was almost wholly bald, and reddish veins laced his pendulous jowls and cheeks. His graying mustache was scraggly and unkempt.

"Welcome to Perdida, my boy," he said expansively. "Pardon my not rising. A game leg received while fighting as an officer for the Lost Cause, you know. A drink?"

"Thanks." Hatfield shook his head curtly, turning back to young Prine. "You're the prosecutin' attorney?"

"That's right." Prine courteously pushed forward a chair. "What can I do for you?"

Briefly, Jim Hatfield recounted what had happened in the wooded section west of town a few hours before—without, however, revealing his identity as a Ranger, or that he suspected why Ben Raven and Nan Coffee had been taken prisoners by Lash Burma's renegades.

Bourke Prine listened intently, his handsome face showing concern.

Judge Clagg gulped the glass empty, and slapped the chair arm with a fat, jeweled hand.

"The dastardly scoundrels!" he rumbled. "They must be brought to justice—justice, I say! What a sad state of affairs when our own duly elected sheriff can be made to suffer such indignity. Were it not for this game leg, suffered when—"

"Yes—yes, Judge!" Prine said impatiently. "You say the dead man was brought into town, Hatfield?"

The Ranger nodded. "Sheriff took him to the funeral parlor."

"You were fortunate in being able to route them and rescue the sheriff and Nan Coffee. Fortunate for them that you happened along just then. How did it happen you were in that vicinity?"

"Just driftin' through, on my way from El Paso to San Antone."

"I see." Prine nodded. "I can't imagine why this happened, unless from the natural enmity that exists between the law and the lawless. Ben Raven has pushed Burma's gang pretty hard, and both Burma and Nick Sabot are cruel, vindictive men. Did the sheriff mention any reason for his treatment?"

Hatfield shook his head. He was thinking, though, that he was not at all impressed with the pompous, whisky-drinking Judge Clagg.

"Sheriff was pretty close-mouthed," the Ranger said.

"Har-ru-mph." The Judge coughed and reached for the bottle on the desk. "I'll take personal charge of this. The dignity of the court must be preserved. I'll go to the Governor—a personal friend of mine, by the way—and demand Rangers. I'll—"

"Judge, remember the night air is bad for your leg," Prine interposed mildly. "You retire early, don't you? Take the bottle."

"Yes—yes, by Jove!" Judge Clagg got heavily to his feet, swaying a little. "Glad I had the honor of meeting you, Hatfield. See me tomorrow, Prine, and we'll go into this. These outrages must cease!"

Clasping the bottle, Judge Clagg waddled out the door and they could hear him lumbering down the stairs.

"The Judge is all right," Bourke Prine said apologetically. "A trifle pompous, and he drinks too much when off duty, but despite this he has a fine sense of duty."

Hatfield nodded without comment.

Prine leaned forward. "Now, Hatfield," he said calmly, "you may speak frankly. You didn't just 'happen' to be in this vicinity. If there's anything you'd care to tell me, I'm listening."

For answer, Hatfield produced his Ranger emblem.

"Captain Bill McDowell recommended you," he said, and grinned. "He used to ride night herd with yore dad. He said any son of old Dave Prine had to be four-square."

The young prosecuting attorney accepted the compliment smilingly and again shook the Lone Wolf's hand.

"I've heard my father speak of Bill McDowell—and I've heard of you, Hatfield. Known as the Lone Wolf, aren't you?"

CHAPTER VI

Coiled Death

FOR several moments Hatfield and Bourke Prine talked amiably, then the conversation again veered to that day's incident. Hatfield revealed the reason for the torture of the young sheriff.

"That's the part that has me worried more than anything," Prine admitted frowningly. "About the Aztec god and treasure, I mean. Not that I put any stock in the story. But apparently others do, which is just as bad."

"Then yuh think this Aztec business is just a legend?"

"Frankly, I do," said Bourke Prine. "I know the story, of course, and it seems to have just enough basis of fact to keep it going. Periodically, for almost a century, this treasure hunting fever has broken out like a rash. This seems to be just another phase."

"What about the piece of jewelry Jim Coffee showed in the Sapphire that night?" Hatfield murmured.

Prine shrugged, spread well-kept hands.

"Frankly, I don't know. I saw the

thing. It was peculiarly shaped, and encrusted with some kind of stones. Maybe it was Aztec, like somebody said. Coffee made frequent trips to El Paso—he could have picked the thing up in a second-hand store. When he was in his cups he liked to boast and act mysterious."

"Then yuh think that wasn't the cause of his killin'?"

"Yes, I do! There are others who don't share my views about the Aztec business being only a legend. It's common belief that Coffee had found the image of Quetzalcoatl. It seems obvious, after what happened today, that Coffee was killed as a direct result of somebody thinking he possessed that knowledge. Possibly he was killed while trying to escape his captors."

"That's the way I see it." Hatfield nodded. "But whether or not Coffee knew that secret, it didn't keep him from dyin'—and it won't save others unless prompt action is taken."

"I agree." Prine ran a big hand worriedly through his wavy yellow hair. "Nobody is more anxious than I to bring to justice the killers of Jim Coffee and scotch this f o o l i s h—but dangerous—rumor of hidden treasure. I'm glad you're here, Hatfield, and you can count on me to the fullest."

"*Bueno!* And it might be a good idea not to let the cat out of the bag about me bein' a Ranger—not even to Judge Clagg."

"You can depend on that, too!" the prosecuting attorney promised as he rose to say good-by. . . .

At sunup the next morning Hatfield saddled Goldy and rode west out of Perdida. A light mist shrouded the lowlands, silvering the grass and dripping from the dark pine and fir trees.

The big Ranger had nothing specific in mind for the day beyond that of reconnoitering over that section of the range in the vicinity of Mantox Canyon where the ruins of Don Salzabar's old *hacienda* were located. He was intrigued by the things Nan Coffee had told him about the place. In this rough section, he suspected, would finally be found the solution to the mystery he was trying to unravel.

His first conviction that Jim Coffee had really blundered onto an ancient Aztec treasure trove had been somewhat shaken by Bourke Prine's views. Young Prine was brilliant, down-to-earth. His opinions were not to be taken lightly.

However, Jim Hatfield was a man who liked to weigh the facts and form his own opinions, then act. Treasure or not, he knew that there was something deadly and sinister afoot here, and it was his job to get to the bottom of it.

Several miles out from Perdida, he left the main road and angled into a dimmer trail that twisted off toward the foothills. This trail led through increasingly rough terrain that was slashed by ravines and studded with patches of timber.

It was while riding along a section of the trail that was pinched in by sloping, brush-clogged embankments, that Goldy suddenly snorted with terror and reared straight up.

Deep in thought, Hatfield was almost unseated. He righted himself, his eyes flashing to the trail ahead. Instantly he saw the cause of the sorrel's fright.

A huge rattlesnake lay coiled in the middle of the trail, its wicked, wedge-shaped head outthrust!

With the speed of light, the Lone Wolf's right hand flashed down and up. Flame spouted from the black gun in his hand, and its bellowing echoes rolled across the rangeland. The mottled coils jerked, the wedge-shaped head seemed to disintegrate.

HATFIELD had acted instinctively. And now, even as he pulled trigger, a cold, warning tingle slithered along his spine.

That rattler was already dead! Somebody had placed it there in the trail!

At the same instant, he heard a low sound ahead and slightly to his right. He flung himself sideward in the saddle, desperately swinging his gun-muzzle, knowing that something more deadly than a rattler was crouched not far away. For he had seen a cluster of ocotillo plants that writhed across the rim of the embankment, fifty feet ahead of him, rustle violently.

Now he saw smoke and flame lash out from the growth, felt the hot breath of a bullet past his cheek, heard the roaring blast of a rifle.

Knowing that he was at a disadvantage atop the still excited sorrel, he kicked loose his feet and tumbled headlong to the rocky earth. He struck on his shoulder, and rolled, his long-barreled Colt starting up a devil's tattoo while he still was in violent motion.

Bullets from his gun sprayed the ocotillo growth with seeking fingers of death.

Through fogging smoke, he saw the shrubbery on the embankment sway violently again, as if a fierce struggle were going on in its depths. Then the head and shoulders of a man broke through. The body dangled there for a moment, while Hatfield held his fire, then pulled loose from the creepers with their fanglike thorns and rolled down the steep decline to the trail.

The Lone Wolf stared warily, gun in hand. Then, when the sprawled figure didn't move, he paced forward and stood beside the man who had tried to kill him from ambush. The man lay on his face, and Hatfield knew now that the ambusher was dead.

He stooped and turned the body on its back. A little shock went through him.

The would-be killer was an Indian!

The dead redskin was dressed in faded drill pants, calico shirt and hide moccasins. His long, raven-black hair was held in place by a crimson bandeau. The carbine that lay beside him, however, was of the latest make.

Jim Hatfield stared narrowly at the dead Indian.

"That jigger's no Apache," he muttered. "Some Apache blood, yeah, but not much. Too big for 'Paches. Features are too smooth and regular. Almost like—" He broke off, whistling softly, then finished, "Looks a lot like an Aztec!"

He stood a moment longer, held by the implications of this. There was small doubt in his mind. He had seen Aztecs deep inside Mexico. Here before him was a man with Aztec blood in his veins.

But why had the Indian tried to dry-gulch him?

The Ranger's gaze lifted to the dark, timbered foothills not far away, remembering Nan Coffee's story of the strange tribe which, supposedly, had come up out of Mexico. Their village—or that of their descendants—was only a few miles away. What was the name of their ancient leader? Maxtla! That name was Aztec.

Eager excitement stirred inside the big Ranger. He lifted the dead Indian easily in his powerful arms and clambered up the embankment. There he lowered the body into a shallow niche and placed rocks over it to protect it from scavengers. Then he returned to Goldy, mounted, and rode on at a faster pace toward the hills.

From directions given him by Nan Coffee, he knew the approximate location of several points of interest—the Indian village, Mantox Canyon, the old *hacienda*. First he meant to visit the village, to satisfy his own curiosity, if nothing else, even though he knew it might be dangerous.

The terrain grew increasingly rough. Canyons gaped unexpectedly. Gaunt ridges rose on all sides, some timbered, others like the hairless spines of huge prehistoric monsters humped in death. For years this wild, desolate land had been the stamping grounds of marauding Apaches and renegade whites. Prospectors and adventurers had roamed its wilderness, seeking its fabled lodes of treasure—and many times finding death, instead.

Above towered the mountain ramparts, frowning, hostile, majestically beautiful in their mighty grandeur. Through their hidden passes had come early Spanish explorers in their quests of the mythical Seven Cities of the Cibolians.

Hatfield came to a rushing, crystal-clear stream that raced and shouted its way down through the hills. Both he and Goldy drank their fill, then followed the stream higher into the hills.

EMERGING from a belt of timber, the tall Ranger drew Goldy to an abrupt halt. The Indian village lay before him, sprawled between the rushing stream and a line of towering red cliffs.

Unlike most Indian villages, there was a distinct orderliness in the arrangement of the adobe huts and hide-covered hogans. At the base of the cliffs Hatfield could see the entrances to several caves, which obviously also served as living quarters for the Indians, for half-naked children played about the openings.

In addition to the children and dogs, more than a score of Indians, both men and women, were visible at various points about the village. They were staring at Hatfield, and the Ranger knew that they probably had been aware of his approach moments before.

He spoke softly to the sorrel and rode forward, slowly, but without hesitation. He rode past a group of squaws and staring children, looking straight ahead, the sorrel's hoof stirring up whorls of dust as he threaded between two rows of hogans and approached the center of the village. Here a group of bucks, dressed much as had been the would-be ambusher, lounged in the shade of a huge oak and silently watched the tall rider.

Hatfield approached to within ten yards of this group, and stopped. These Indians, he knew, had the same regular, coppery features as the one he had killed. They stared at him, not stirring, their black eyes cold with hostility.

The Ranger placed his hands carefully on the saddle-horn and returned their gaze steadily.

"I come as a friend," he said slowly. "I would like to talk with Maxtla."

CHAPTER VII

Shadows of the Past

HATFIELD thought, for a moment, that the Indians had not understood him. Then one of the bucks turned without speaking and walked slowly toward a hogan that was the largest in the village. He disappeared through the doorway, and Hatfield waited, feeling the unconcealed hostility of the eyes that were riveted on him.

The buck reappeared at the hogan doorway, standing respectfully aside to let another pass. This second Indian came without hesitation straight toward Hatfield. He was, the Ranger saw, incredibly old and scrawny. His thin shoulders were stooped, his bare arms like crooked reeds. But despite his age the old one walked with a quick, springy step.

He approached to within a few feet of the Ranger, and stopped. His parchment-like face was a network of wrinkles that looked as ancient as time itself. But his eyes, set in deep pits, alert and intelligent, glowed with a strange inner fire.

"I am Maxtla," he said simply, in almost faultless English.

Hatfield bowed. "My name is Hatfield," he said. "I am a friend."

"What does the white man wish?" Maxtla asked bluntly. "No stranger is welcome here."

"I had no intention of intrudin'. I bring news."

"What kind of news?"

"As I rode peaceably along the trail," Hatfield said slowly, gesturing back the way he had come, "an attempt was made on my life from ambush. I was forced to kill my attacker. He was a red man, a tall man with a scar on the left cheek."

There was a moment of dead silence. Maxtla's expression remained unchanged. Then one of the Indians muttered a single word:

"Guatamozin!"

"I am sorry," Hatfield said softly. "But I will kill any man who first tries to take my life. I buried yore *compadre* under some rocks beside the trail, to keep away vultures." And he explained exactly where the body lay.

"The white man had better go!" the old Indian said abruptly.

"*Bueno!* I'm plumb sorry I had to—"

"Go! And do not return!"

Maxtla's tone was suddenly harsh, and the flame blazing in his pitted eyes had become wholly cruel and wicked.

Jim Hatfield's lips tightened, and anger stirred like a bright red flame inside him, at the old Indian's imperious order. But he knew that this was neither the place nor time to start a ruckus. The young Indians were watching him, fingering their guns, awaiting only a word from old Maxtla to leap into action.

A pressure of his knees whirled Goldy and sent him at a slow walk back the way they had come. He knew that to show fear, or bolt, might bring a hail of lead after him. Indians, good or bad, respected courage.

He reached the timber, still at a leisurely pace, and rode into it. Away from the village, his anger cooled. After all, he *had* been trespassing, and perhaps the drygulcher, Guatamozin, had mis-

taken him for somebody else.

Guatamozin—that was another Aztec name. Hatfield's eyes narrowed in thought. More and more he was becoming convinced that in the story Nan Coffee had told him there was considerably more than legend.

He made a half-circle through the timber, returning to the stream a mile above the Indian village. In his ears was a steady droning roar that was louder and more deep-throated than the usual rushing of water over rock. More like a waterfall, the Ranger thought—and paused in amazement as he broke through a screening thicket into a small clearing.

Before him was a rock wall, and spouting from a hole in the rock was a solid, living stream of foaming water!

Here, Hatfield realized, was the source of the stream he had been following, springing cold and clear from the bosom of the earth itself. The fissure through which the water tumbled was perhaps five feet across. The water came with a rush and a roar, plunging downward ten feet into a deep, clear pool. Here, the Lone Wolf realized, was a miracle of nature—a torrent of pure, sweet water springing from the earth's breast to sustain life in man, beast and plant.

HIS gaze lifted. Beyond this spot the hills rose sharply. Several hundred yards above this spot they parted abruptly as if a giant knife had slashed through them. Serrated rock walls reared to the right and left until they seemed to pierce the sky.

Here, Hatfield knew, was Mantox Canyon. A queer excitement stirred in the big Ranger as he stared at that gaping fissure in the beginning peaks. There was something grim and evil and forbidding about it that seemed to reach out and clutch at him.

He circled the rock walls from which the stream poured, and finally rode into the mouth of Mantox Canyon. The canyon was several hundred yards in width. Its floor was clogged with sparse timber and dense, thorny thickets out of which jutted needlelike rock spires, and limestone formations that had been carved by wind and rain into the shapes of grotesque monsters and beautiful cathedrals.

A strong wind swirled through the funnel-like pass, making sounds like many-toned pipe organ music among the spires and weirdly carved formations. A cloud passing over the sun threw the canyon into purple shadows.

Hatfield shivered, feeling the malignant evil of the place, and glanced back the way he had come. He started, hand falling to gun-butt. He was almost certain he had seen a skulking figure back there.

The figure had vanished instantly, like a shadow, into a clump of cedar. It had looked a lot like the skinny, warped figure of old Maxtla the Indian. Hatfield shrugged and rode on along the canyon. Likely the old Indian chief had trailed him out of curiosity, to find out what he was up to.

He came suddenly upon the *hacienda* ruins, huddled like the weathered bones of a skeleton in a large circular clearing that was closely hemmed in by dark timber and encroaching vines.

The *hacienda* had been built like the castle of some feudal baron. The main building was surrounded by lesser structures—adobe stables, sheds, servants' quarters. At the rear was a small cemetery, and the ruins of what obviously had been a chapel.

The entire group of buildings was surrounded by an adobe wall ten feet high. The wall had crumbled in spots, in others it was shrouded by jungle-like undergrowth and masses of creeping, coiling vines that writhed like many-hued snakes.

At the front, sagging iron gates dangled from leaning posts. From this gate a weed-grown flagstone driveway, flanked by storm-twisted manzanita, led up to the *hacienda*. The gaunt spires of the two-storied structure jutted toward the shadowed sky like skeletal arms lifted in mute supplication.

A dozen buzzards huddled on the crumbling wall at one side. They watched Hatfield, hissing and croaking their protests. The wind made a sound like sepulchral laughter among the ruins.

The Lone Wolf shivered again.

"*El Rancho de Sambres*—that ain't hard to believe now!" he muttered. "No wonder the Indians and Mexicans claim they've heard chains rattlin' at night, and men screaming', and sounds like a terrible fight's goin' on. Well, I always han-

kered to meet a real ghost! Mebbe now's my chance."

He dismounted, tied Goldy to one of the iron posts, moved through the gateway and along the weed-grown driveway. His boots thudded hollowly on the ancient flagstones. He climbed a flight of steps and paused on a brick-paved patio.

Columns were crumbling, grille-work rusting. More buzzards, waddling along the parapet of the flat roof, started up an unholy chorus of croaking and hissing. Hatfield picked up a rock and flung it at them disgustedly, then crossed the patio to great oaken double doors.

The doors creaked and groaned as he grasped the rusty handle and pushed, then they swung open. He stepped through into a high-ceilinged room. Huge spiders dangled from webs and scuttled on walls and ceiling. Mammoth rats scurried for holes. A thick layer of dust coated everything.

Hatfield's eyes narrowed with sudden interest. The imprints of many feet made a bizarre network on the dusty floor. But there also were other, larger tracks.

Boot prints!

"Never heard of ghosts makin' tracks before," the Ranger muttered. "Moccasin tracks, too. Well, mebbe Don Salzabar's crowd and them Aztecs *do* fight at night after a hundred years!"

He went through into another, smaller room which, like the first, showed signs of having been richly furnished. Remnants of lovely tapestries dangled from the walls and lay on the dusty floor, along with beautiful paintings. The woodwork was of heavy virgin oak, artistically finished.

THIS second room opened into a wide corridor that extended to the back of the rear mansion, with rooms flanking it on each side. The boot tracks, of recent origin, showed in the dust of the hallway and in most of the rooms.

In the center of one of the rooms was a massive trap-door. It required all of the Ranger's great strength to lift the heavy door by the iron ring. The opening revealed a flight of stairs leading downward into musty darkness. Having no light, Hatfield did not descend the stairs.

But in almost every room, both upstairs and down, he found something of interest. It was a weird, ghostly place, its twisting corridors inhabited by bats, spiders and rats, and filled with flitting shadows. Once Hatfield thought he heard the shuffle of feet somewhere in the ruins; again, he was certain he heard a door slam.

But it was, he decided without conviction, the wind.

The sun was almost down when he reluctantly emerged from the ruins. Shadows already were piling up in Mantox Canyon. Hatfield stood for a moment, adjusting eyes and mind to this sudden change from the musty, ghostly past to reality.

He heard the croaking of the buzzards. And he suddenly realized that intermingled with the croaking and hissing was another sound. The silvery, melodious tinkling of a bell!

His eyes flashed to the crumbling wall. Almost instantly he picked out the vulture with the tiny bell dangling from its scrawny neck, huddled several feet from the others, apparently a semi-outcast among its fellows because of the eternally tinkling bell.

As the belled vulture stirred and waltzed along the wall, Hatfield saw something white gleaming on the buzzard's scaly brown leg.

"Looks like a slip of paper wrapped about the critter's shank," he muttered, and reached for a six-shooter.

But at that instant the belled buzzard, sensing its peril, flapped from the wall and vanished behind it. Swearing, gun in hand, Hatfield ran forward, wholly convinced that here, almost within his grasp, lay the solution to Jim Coffee's death.

Startled, the other buzzards started flapping crazily about, setting up a raucous din of croaking and squawking.

The belled buzzard had vanished.

Hatfield rocked back on his heels, as a gunshot crashed. He knew the shot had not been fired at him. It had been a considerable distance away, and had come from the mouth of the canyon.

Flinging a last glance at the spot where the belled vulture had vanished, the Ranger wheeled and returned to Goldy. This place had left its mark on him. There

was evil here, and danger. He was jumpy, his nerves stretched to a wire-tautness.

Who had fired that shot, and why?

He mounted the big sorrel and eased back through the timber and undergrowth. Goldy, as if sensing the need for caution, walked daintily, almost silently. The mammoth music of the wind among the spires and trees was the only sound.

Hatfield rode slowly, eyes alert, hands hovering near gun-butts. His flesh crawled with the feel of lurking danger. That gunshot had not been without meaning.

The golden sorrel stopped suddenly, without word from his rider, and stood rock-still. At the same instant a laugh sounded directly ahead, startlingly close, low and wicked and brutal.

Hatfield slid from the saddle and, with a low word to the sorrel, eased ahead through the underbrush. He stopped at the edge of a clearing in the timber that was laced with yellow-belled tornillas, Spanish dagger and giant yucca, and crouched.

CHAPTER VIII

Maxtla

ON THE far side of the clearing, a hundred feet away, the Ranger could see the figures of three men in the beginning shadows. Two of them—gun-belted, evil-faced—were on their feet, and hovered close to the third man. Two of Lash Burma's gunnies.

This third man Hatfield recognized as old Maxtla. Maxtla was down on his knees, the upper part of his thin body thrust forward, his head thrown back as if staring at the sky. The old Indian's hands were bound behind him. Blood ran over his face.

The ancient Indian's eyes were wide-staring, and on his wrinkled face was a look of agony.

"Talk, you old buzzard, or that wet rawhide'll cut yore gullet in two!" snarled one of the white men. "Just nod yore head when yuh get ready to cave."

Realization slapped at Jim Hatfield, and savage rage at the diabolical cruelty of the two renegade whites roared through him. Now he saw that some kind of thong had been tied tightly about Maxtla's bony throat and was digging into his withered flesh.

It was, he knew from what he had heard, a strip of wet rawhide. As the rawhide dried, it would contract. Maxtla, helpless with his hands bound behind him, would be slowly strangled to death—unless he gave the signal that he was ready to tell the outlaws whatever it was they wished to know.

And the old Indian, Hatfield knew, would die before surrendering. Already his skull-like face was turning black. His eyes, almost bulging from their pits, blazed hate and contempt up at his captors.

Driven by his fury and the desperate urgency for haste, the big Ranger leaped from his place of concealment and raced with drawn guns across the clearing.

"You buzzard-spawned imps of perdition!" he cried harshly. "Get away from that old man, or Hades'll be rotten with yore smell!"

As that stentorian voice rang out, the two renegades whirled, surprised oaths ripping from their lips. Seeing Hatfield's towering figure driving headlong at them, guns in hand, they grabbed for their own sixes.

Those guns came out, and blasted fire and lead at the Lone Wolf's charging figure. But they had been caught off-balance, thrown into a confusion bordering on panic by that tall, blazing-eyed figure slamming recklessly at them, and their bullets slashed the air inches from Hatfield's head.

Then Hatfield's own guns were roaring and kicking in his hands as he ran. One of the outlaws cursed bitterly, spun half about and fell sideward to his knee. But he came up again, still swearing, and crashed limpingly into a cluster of giant yucca, fighting for a fringe of timber a few yards away.

Deserted by his wounded companion, the other outlaw flung his emptied six-shooter at the leaping Hatfield, whirled and dived into the underbrush.

Still furiously angry, Hatfield started to charge recklessly in after them. But from the corner of his eye he saw that old Maxtla had fallen forward to the

ground and lay there twitching weakly.

The Ranger whirled back, holstered his guns, whipped a keen-edged knife from his belt. The rawhide thong, he saw, was almost buried in Maxtla's scrawny throat. The old Indian's tongue protruded and his eyes seemed ready to pop from their sockets. He seemed to be breathing not at all.

Hatfield thrust a finger under the taut thong, taking no time for gentleness, and slashed through the rawhide.

The Indian dragged breath into his lungs with a rasping sigh. He lay still a moment, gasping, then gradually breathed more calmly.

Hatfield wheeled to his feet, remembering the gunmen. Somewhere off in the thickets he heard the noisy passage of two horses, the sounds gradually receding. Pursuit would be hopeless now. He turned back to Maxtla.

The old Indian was sitting up now. He was looking with expressionless eyes at the Ranger, rubbing his throat with a claw-like hand. After a moment he got unsteadily to his feet.

"Maxtla thanks the Tall One for saving his worthless life," he said hoarsely. "The evil ones would have killed me."

"Not if yuh'd told them what they wished to know," the Ranger returned quickly.

"That I could not do."

"Yuh followed me from the village?"

"Yes. I was curious about the Tall One, and sorry I had been forced to order you away from our hogans. The young ones were angry because you had killed Guatamozin, and perhaps would have done you harm."

"Guatamozin tried to kill me," Hatfield pointed out. "Why?"

A VEIL of secrecy seemed to slide over the old man's pitted eyes and he shrugged bony shoulders.

"Guatamozin is dead," he said hoarsely, "so no man can ever know what was in his heart and mind. But he was an evil son of an evil father. Perhaps like the wolf, he just had the urge to kill."

Old Maxtla, Hatfield knew, had evaded his question.

"The Old One does not give a straight answer," he said bluntly. "What were the two jiggers who captured yuh tryin' to make yuh tell 'em?"

"That I cannot tell you, Tall One, even though you saved my life."

"The secret of the jewels of Quetzalcoatl?" Hatfield pressed relentlessly. "Was that the reason Guatamozin tried to kill me—because he thought I was after the same thing?"

Maxtla's gaunt figure stiffened. All the friendliness left his black eyes, leaving them cold and wary and hostile.

"The Tall One would be wise to put out of his mind all thoughts of the things he has just mentioned!" Maxtla said stiffly, turned abruptly, and vanished like a shadow into the darkening timber. His words had been a cold warning.

Hatfield let him go, even though anger and frustration seethed inside him. He had been balked at every turn. Twice within the last few minutes—just now, and when he'd had the belled buzzard almost under his sights—he felt certain he had been on the verge of important discoveries.

Now he was back where he had started. Then, thinking back over the day's events, he knew that he had spent a profitable several hours. Things before only suspected were now certainties in his mind.

The blood-stained vampire god, Quetzalcoatl, had cast his malignant shadow over this range.

Jim Hatfield's eyes were grim and thoughtful as he returned to Goldy, mounted and headed for Perdida. . . .

After stabling and graining the sorrel, Hatfield went to his hotel room, where he shaved and washed away the day's dust. Then he went down to the dining room, where he took his time about putting away a huge meal of ham and eggs, fried potatoes and black coffee, afterward going out and angling across the street to the sheriff's office.

Nan Coffee was in the office with Sheriff Ben Raven. They greeted the tall Ranger with genuine relief.

"When yuh didn't show up before sundown, I figgered yuh'd run into some kind of ruckus," Raven declared.

"Ben was about ready to start looking for you," Nan said, and smiled. "And I was about ready to go with him."

"Flattery's not good for a man!" The Lone Wolf laughed lightly, but he was

pleased at their concern. He sat down, for the moment content after a satisfying meal to be with these two friends. "Fact is, I have had a little excitement."

Briefly he recounted what had happened that day.

"Then you think there's really something to this Aztec god business?" Nan exclaimed when he had finished.

"Queerer things have happened," Hatfield said evasively. "These Indian names—old Maxtla, and Guatamozin, the buck who tried to 'gulch me—they're Aztec, not Apache. And they're all too secretive and hostile to suit me. The way old Maxtla acted when I mentioned the jewels of Quetzalcoatl builds up to a mighty big smoke. This drygulchin' redskin, Guatamozin, didn't try to kill me just because—as Maxtla put it—he was 'an evil son of an evil father.' He was there on the trail for that purpose."

"Then yuh think the Indians have yuh spotted as a Ranger?" Raven asked.

"I think somebody has. The Indians, if they're mixed up in some tricky Aztec business, wouldn't care whether I was a Ranger or a horned elephant with pink wings."

"About the dead Indian," Raven went on. "A JZ puncher found the body where yuh'd buried it beside the trail today. Buzzards led him to it, and he brought it into town. I didn't know you'd killed him, of course, but this puncher gave a description of a rider he'd seen ridin' along the trail near there an hour before. It tallied mighty close with you. I knew that if yuh'd beefed him, of course, yuh had a good reason, so I stayed in town."

HATFIELD nodded.

"I aim to pay that old *hacienda* another visit before long—mebbe tomorrow. There are some queer things goin' on there that I want to look into. Them boot tracks in the dust, for one. The place is supposed to be deserted, yet a lot of folks, both white and red, have been sashayin' about among the ruins lately." He looked at Nan Coffee, asked abruptly, "What happened to the bell yore father aimed to put on that bull the day he was killed?"

"Why—why, I don't know." She looked puzzled at the young sheriff. "I'd never thought of it, really."

"By the blue blazes, that's right!" Raven exclaimed. "It wasn't on him when he was found." Then he shook his head. "But he'd gone through a lot. I reckon it got lost out of his pocket. Why'd yuh ask that, Hatfield?"

Hatfield told them about the belled buzzard.

"I've got a hunch the bell on that buzzard is the same one Coffee had," he declared grimly. "Somebody put it there. And somethin' was tied to the critter's leg—a piece of paper, looked like. Folks don't put bells on buzzards and tie papers to 'em without reason."

Nan's face was pale, and excitement burned in her eyes.

"But—but, why would Father do a thing like that, even if he were able?"

"Mebbe he knew he was dyin', and figgered that was the only way to let it be known what had happened to him. Mebbe he named his killers—or somethin' else. He knew that a belled buzzard would attract attention, that somebody would likely kill it out of curiosity—and find the message he'd tied to its leg. Mebbe I'm wrong, but I'd stake Goldy against a plugged peso I'm not!"

"Then we've got to find that critter, and down it!" Ben Raven declared, jumping excitedly to his feet. "It may be the key to the whole mystery!"

"Mebbe so." The big Ranger smiled quietly. "But take it easy, Ben. We can't do it tonight."

"Oh, if we only could!" There were tears in Nan's blue eyes. "It's not only that I want to see the ones who killed Father brought to justice, but I—I'm afraid."

"Nan has seen prowlers about the ranch," Raven explained. "Always at night."

"You get a good look at 'em?" Hatfield asked quickly.

She shook her head. "They were just shadows. Except once, when I saw somebody looking through my window. I'm sure it was an Indian."

"Nan's in danger!" Ben Raven said excitedly, and again jumped to his feet. "She's not safe out there. I've begged her to come into town and stay until this is cleared up, where I can look after her, but she won't do it!"

"Circle Three is my home," Nan said

slowly, steadily. "My father and mother built the house with their own hands. They lived and died there. That land is mine, and all I have there, and I won't leave!"

"That's Texas talkin', Ben," the Lone Wolf said quietly. "If Texas had run from a fight she wouldn't be a land of free men and women today. Just be careful, Nan—and keep yore powder primed." He got to his feet and moved toward the door. "Well, I aim to get me a nightcap and hunt my soogans. Tomorrow might be a hard day."

CHAPTER IX

Message in the Night

QUIETLY Hatfield went out of the sheriff's office and crossed over to the Sapphire. Bourke Prine was there, standing at one end of the bar with Judge Clagg. Hatfield frowned with annoyance. He had hoped to find the young prosecuting attorney, but he had no stomach for the pompous, whisky-swilling Judge Clagg.

Prine was bareheaded, his wavy yellow hair shining like raw gold in the lamplight. He stood out in that crowd, a handsome, well-dressed man who radiated power and self-confidence, yet there was no air of condescension about him.

Judge Clagg stood with paunch thrust against the bar, a cigar in one hand and a whisky glass in the other, his pendulous jaws trembling as he talked. Obviously he was, as usual, in an expansive mood.

It was too late to retreat now, so Hatfield crossed to the bar and ordered rye. He was spotted almost instantly by Prine and Judge Clagg. Prine nodded cordially, but the Judge scowled and beckoned imperiously with the pudgy, jeweled hand that held the cigar.

"Come over here, Hatfield," he ordered loudly. "Got somethin' I want to say to you!"

"Say it, then," the Ranger suggested, holding his position.

Judge Clagg's scowl deepened, his face reddening. He coughed and waddled over to Hatfield, followed slowly by Bourke Prine. The Judge jammed his cigar between fat lips and waved his glass.

"Hatfield, where've you been all day?" he demanded.

"Judge," the Ranger drawled, "I'm not on the witness stand."

"You may be before long, my man, you may be! Killing has been done. A poor, ignorant Indian was found dead beside the trail today. He'd been shot in the back."

"Not in the back, Judge," Prine murmured.

"Killed, at any rate!" Judge Clagg glared, puffing out his cheeks. "Hatfield, there's reason to believe that foul deed was perpetrated by you!"

Hatfield turned slowly. Judge Clagg, he saw, was half-drunk. But drunk or sober his accusation could cause a lot of trouble. The room had become very quiet and the customers were staring curiously at the big Ranger.

"Judge," Hatfield asked bluntly, "are you accusing me of bein' a killer—or is it just whisky talk?"

The Judge almost strangled on his drink. He spluttered and glared about the bar room in outraged anger.

"Yes, by godfrey, I am!" he blustered. "I, personally, will bring the charges and have you brought before the—"

"Judge, aren't you being a trifle hasty?" Prine interposed mildly.

"Hasty, when a vile deed has been done, when justice hangs in the balance? No, my good man."

"Ill vouch for Jim Hatfield!" Prine stepped away from the bar, a sudden ring of authority and command in his voice as he placed a hand on the Ranger's arm. "We'll talk this over later, Judge. Shall we go over to my office, Hatfield?"

"*Bueno!*" Hatfield murmured, grinning impudently at the spluttering Judge, and left the saloon arm-in-arm with Prine.

They moved down the street and soon were in Bourke Prine's richly furnished office above the bank. Prine lit a lamp, offered the Ranger an expensive cigar from a box. Hatfield accepted, they fired up, and both settled back in cushioned chairs.

"I wish you would be tolerant of Judge Clagg," Prine said, frowning. "He is not a talented man, but he's an honest one."

"So long as he don't mess things up," Hatfield said grimly. "He was right. I did kill that Indian who was found beside the trail."

Prine nodded. "I supposed you did. Care to tell me about it?"

Once again Hatfield recounted the day's happenings. Prine listened with keen interest, excitement mounting in his piercing gray eyes.

"Hatfield," he exclaimed, "if what you say is true, I've been wrong, stupidly wrong! Apparently, after all, there is more than mere gossip to this Aztec god business. Maxtla is a cunning old buzzard. You never know what he's thinking."

"And tough," added Hatfield. "He would have died before tellin' those two cutthroats anything. And then, when he found out I was on the trail of the same thing, he closed up tight as a bear trap."

BOURKE Prine paced the floor, yellow hair awry, an inner flame glowing in his eyes. It was the first time Hatfield had seen the man's calm broken.

"We've got to get to the bottom of this, Hatfield, and quickly!" he declared, slapping a fist into his palm. "Nothing will drive men to such frenzies of passion and evil as the scent of treasure. No decent citizen is safe when treasure-mad men run amok!"

The Ranger nodded quietly as Prine continued to pace the floor and exhort, perhaps unconsciously, with court-room eloquence. The young prosecuting attorney was only expressing Hatfield's sentiments, but in more flowery language than the Lone Wolf would have used.

Suddenly there was a sharp click as some small object struck the floor and rolled against the wall. The object had come through an open window, obviously thrown from the street below.

"What's that?" Prine asked sharply.

Hatfield took the object from the floor. It was a soiled slip of paper, wrapped about a .45 cartridge and tied with a tiny strip of rawhide.

Hatfield unwrapped the paper and frowningly read the few words that had been scrawled on it with a pencil:

I was rude to the Tall One who saved my worthless life. If he will come at midnight to where the sweet water springs from the earth's bosom, I will tell him what he wishes to know.

Maxtla.

"What is it?" Prine asked sharply.

Hatfield handed Prine the paper without comment and watched the young attorney's face as he read what was on it. Surprise tightened Prine's face at first, then gave way to eager triumph. The flame brightened in his eyes.

Hatfield crossed to the window, which opened onto the street, and looked out. The night's festivities were just getting under way and perhaps two-score men were in the street. There was no way of knowing who had tossed the cartridge through the window.

"This is a chance!" Prine exclaimed, with satisfaction. "Perhaps *the* chance we need to bust this wide open. It seems that, after all, old Maxtla is not ungrateful for your saving his mangy hide."

"If he wrote the note," Hatfield murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I learned a long time ago that things are not always just what they seem. Not that I have any reason to think he didn't write it. In fact, the words of the note sound just like Maxtla talked. What's yore opinion, Prine?"

"I think Maxtla wrote the note," Bourke Prine said promptly. "Maxtla is an educated Indian, and I've seen samples of his writing. This looks like it. But I want you to make up your own mind about this, Hatfield. It might be a trick."

Jim Hatfield nodded. "It's a chance we have to take in this game, and one I'm glad to take. 'Where the sweet water springs from the earth's bosom . . .' Where would yuh say that is?"

"That seems obvious. Where the stream plunges out of the mountainside below Mantox Canyon. That stream has meant life itself to the Indians."

"My idea," the Lone Wolf agreed. He got to his feet and looked at his watch. "Four hours yet till midnight. I've got time for a couple hours' sleep."

"I'll ride with you," Prine offered eagerly. "I'm just as anxious as you are to—"

"I'll ride alone," the Ranger said quietly, but firmly. "Maxtla might get spooky, and too much is at stake. Thanks just

the same, Prine. I'll get in touch with yuh soon as I get back."

He went out, crossed to the hotel and went up to his room. Removing only his boots, he lay down and was almost instantly asleep.

ALMOST exactly two hours later the Ranger awoke, dashed cold water over his face from a basin, and went down into the dark street.

Quickly he got Goldy and rode out of Perdida, headed west through the night toward Mantox Canyon. A thin sliver of a moon rode the sky. Sheet lightning played redly along the southern horizon.

Anticipation was a bright flame inside the Ranger. It wasn't old Maxtla and his followers who menaced Nan Coffee and anybody else who stood in the path of evil conquest. Lash Burma and his renegades were the ones who in their overweening greed were striking out indiscriminately.

But Hatfield was playing a hunch that Maxtla, if he would but talk, could go far toward clearing up the mystery.

Years along the Frontier danger trails had taught Jim Hatfield the virtues of patience and wariness. But he had also learned that few high-stake games could be won without gambling. If the note tossed through Prine's window was the bait in a trap set by his enemies, he was willing to take the chance.

He circled to avoid the Indian village, then cut back to the stream. Soon the droning roar of the water surging through the fissure in the wall came to his ears. Eyes and ears alert, he went cautiously forward, while the droning sound grew steadily louder.

CHAPTER X

Home in Boot Hill

IN A dense thicket bordering the small clearing that cradled the huge fountain, Jim Hatfield dismounted and went forward afoot, pausing at the edge of the clearing. Directly before him, leaping and gleaming like liquid fire in the moonlight, was the column of water that spouted from the mountainside.

Timber crept up close to the pool on two sides. Back of the surging water were the purple shadows cast by the cliffs. A transparent gray mist coiled up out of the pool and shrouded the clearing.

It lacked several minutes until midnight. Those several moments the big Ranger crouched utterly motionless in his place of concealment, eyes and ears alert for some sign of movement. But there was no sound except the water, no movement other than the coiling mist.

At exactly midnight, Hatfield got up and walked boldly out into the clearing. He advanced without visible sign of suspicion or wariness, but every sense was alert, his fingers brushing the butts of his twin Colts.

He approached to within ten feet of the surging water, and stopped. Still he had seen no sign of anybody. The mist writhed up from the water and curled about him, seeming to rub clammy hands over his face. While he stood limned in a patch of moonlight, shadows hemmed him on three sides.

He heard a low sound to his right, and whirled in that direction. A dim figure detached itself from the shadows and came slowly toward him. The figure, Hatfield saw, was slight, wore light drill pants and a light shirt, and his long dark hair was uncovered. The man moved silently on moccasined feet.

"Maxtla?" the Ranger called softly.

"It is Maxtla, Tall One," the man said in a guttural voice. "I have come to—"

Hatfield's hands, hovering over gun-butts, stabbed downward. That guttural voice was not Maxtla's! It was not an Indian's voice at all, but a white man's. He had walked into a trap!

He saw the figure lunge toward him. At the same instant he heard a hard, swift pound of boots behind him, and knew that the real peril lay there.

He leaped to one side, whirling like a big cat in mid-air, the black guns clearing leather. He saw half a dozen men leap out of the shadows and hurtle toward him. One of his guns blasted, and one of the hurtling men crashed to the ground and rolled with a splash into the pool.

Then those remaining, yelling savagely,

drove in upon the Lone Wolf. The fury of their slamming rush smashed him backward to the ground. Stars and pinwheels swirled crazily before his eyes as the back of his head struck against a small boulder. Stunned, momentarily without volition, he dropped both his guns.

He knew that the attackers had pounced on him with the vicious, triumphant snarls of a dog pack. They were mauling and kicking and clawing at him.

Wickedly angry, Hatfield braced his mighty muscles and fought to his feet by sheer strength and will-power. He struck out savagely, his iron-hard fists cracking against flesh and bone. A man went down like a poled ox. But the others swirled about him, clubbing with fists and guns.

Still dazed by the blow on his head, he fought almost wholly by instinct. He could see the snarling, evil faces only dimly, as if in a nightmare. The mist seemed to swirl about him as if tormented by a strong wind.

He thought he saw the massive, animal-like figure of Nick Sabot, thought he heard Sabot growl, "Let me have him—I'll tear out his heart!"

"Easy, Nick," another voice warned. "The Chief wants this jigger alive!"

Despite the fact that he was only half-conscious, Hatfield's arms worked like powerful pistons. Men grunted, crashed to earth, but rose and reentered the fight.

Then a gun-barrel crashed against the Ranger's head from behind. The moonlit clearing seemed to explode in a wild burst of color. A purple fog rushed with a roaring sound through his brain, and with bitterness he realized that he was sinking down into unconsciousness. . . .

HE SEEMED to be drifting endlessly over a dark and stormy sea, the boat he was in rocked violently by the waves. He was not alone in the boat, because he could hear voices, although he couldn't see anybody. He couldn't see anything except a weird, misty glow that shimmered before his eyes. He could hear the roaring, angry voice of the sea, and feel its violence, and from a vast distance he could hear the low, secretive voices.

Then he knew he was not in a boat, but on a horse. The horse was Goldy, and the Ranger's wrists were tied to the saddle-horn. He rode in the middle of a small group of other horsemen. It was the voices of these men that he heard.

Remembrance returned with a rush. He had walked into a trap, been captured. He was being taken through the night toward some unknown destination. They were riding through rough, timbered country, with the Chisos towering blackly, very near in the night. He didn't know how long he had been unconscious.

"Soon be to Jake's cabin," he heard one of the riders say. "We'll lock this jigger inside, leave a man to guard him, and the rest of us will ride on to see the Chief."

"I'll guard him," Sabot growled.

"I'm not shore what the Chief'll want done with this bucko," the first voice went on. "Mebbe he'll want to talk to him before we put him away. Then ag'in, mebbe he'll want to get on with that other business before mornin'."

[*Turn page*]

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Hatfield rode with his chin on his chest, feigning unconsciousness, hoping to learn more from what the outlaws said. But their talk drifted to other matters.

Lash Burma was not with this group. Was he the Chief they had mentioned, or was there somebody else more important in the outlaw organization?

Stealthily Hatfield slid a hand over his shirt front, feeling relief as he located his Ranger badge inside the hidden pocket. Probably, if these outlaws had known he was a Ranger, he would already be dead. Rangers had the respect of honest folks, the venomous hatred of all law-breakers.

They rode into a clearing that cradled a low log cabin, huddled between two timber-shadowed ridges. The cabin was dark, but showed signs of recent habitation. A ragged shirt flapped on a tree limb. A long-lashed blacksnake whip dangled from a peg on the cabin wall. A hound dog came snarling from under the cabin. Fifty yards from the cabin was a high pole corral that held a couple of cows.

One of the renegades dismounted and banged on the door, and when he received no answer, pushed open the door and entered. He came back out a moment later and announced:

"Jake's gone."

"Never mind," growled the leader of the group. "We'll leave this jasper here anyhow, with Nick, to make shore he don't get away. See if he's woke up yet?"

Hatfield knew that there was no need for further pretense. He lifted his head, as if just regaining consciousness, and stared about as if bewildered.

"Come out of it, huh?" sneered one of the outlaws. "Well, this is home for you, tall man—home till yuh die!"

The other riders guffawed, swung to the ground.

The leader of the moment, a bearded, burly man whom the other called "Hachita," came up close to Hatfield.

"I'm cuttin' yore hands loose, Hatfield," he said harshly. "Move crooked and yuh'll die quick!"

Hatfield said nothing. He watched as the burly man drew a knife and slashed through the thongs binding his wrists. He was helpless, without guns. Half a dozen pairs of wary, cruel eyes were riveted on him.

"Get down!"

He obeyed, knowing he had no chance for escape now. He thought, "How did they find out my name?" He looked about at his captors. They ringed him with drawn guns now. They were giving him no further opportunity to wreak havoc with those mauling, battering fists.

"Pete, put that big red hoss of his in the corral with Nick's bronc. Pronto—we're wastin' time!" Hachita jabbed his gun-muzzle at the Ranger. "Get inside that cabin, bucko! And don't strain yoreself tryin' to get out. Yuh wouldn't be any safer in a jail cell! And if yuh got out, Nick'd tear yore head off and chunk it at yuh!"

Hatfield shrugged, turned, and went into the dark cabin. The door was slammed to behind him and he heard a heavy bar being slid into place. He remembered what the outlaw leader had said:

"This is home for you, tall man—home till yuh die!"

How long, he wondered, would that be?

THE Ranger had plenty of time to wonder, too, as the hours of the late night dragged past, one after the other, with maddening slowness. Yet each that passed, he knew, brought him that much nearer to a certain doom, nearer to a final home in Boot Hill.

At last he figured that four hours had gone by. And for the tenth time, since being thrown into the dungeonlike cabin, Hatfield made a thorough examination of his prison from roof to sod floor. And, as had been the case each time before at its conclusion, despair and desperation lay heavily inside him.

There was no window in the one-room cabin. Its walls were of heavy split logs with the seams clay-caked. The roof was of lighter logs that were overlaid with sod. The door, the only possible outlet, was of heavy oak planks and securely barred from the outside.

Hatfield knew that dawn was at hand. There was a tiny crack between two door planks through which grayish light had begun to show. Any minute now the main body of outlaws would return. With them would be the "Chief" who would

pronounce the Ranger's fate. There was little doubt in Hatfield's mind as to what that fate would be.

Most of these last four hours the Ranger had spent trying to find some way out of his prison. But it had proved futile—even his great strength was useless here. There simply was no way out except by the door, and the door was barred.

The Lone Wolf knelt and placed his eye to the tiny crack in the door. Dimly, directly in front of the door, he could see the massive figure of Nick Sabot sprawled on a blanket. The giant was asleep, snoring raucously.

For an hour after Hachita and the others had left, Sabot had paced back and forth before the cabin, hurling taunts and insults through the door at the prisoner. Finally, unable to elicit any response from Hatfield, he had given up the one-sided game, spread a blanket on the ground and gone to sleep.

This dereliction of duty had done Hatfield no good. There was no way out of the cabin.

Through the crack he could see Sabot's dark, cruel face, his broad mouth gaping wide as he snored; could see his thick, heaving chest. In the gray beginning light Sabot looked beastlike.

The Ranger knew that unless he got out of here quickly he would never leave alive. He had to find some way to make Nick Sabot open that door. He backed away from the door.

Suddenly then Jim Hatfield screamed, loudly and shrilly, a cry filled with terror and alarm. He stamped his boots wildly against the floor.

"Sabot!" he bellowed. "Open up that door—there's a rattler in here!" And he continued to thresh about like a man in mortal fear.

He heard Sabot's snores chop off, then the big man's sleepy, muddled voice.

"Wh—what is it? What's all the ruckus about in there, bucko?"

"Rattlers!" Hatfield yelled frantically, and kicked over the stove, bringing down the pipes with a terrific clatter. "A whole passel of 'em! Must have been bedded down in the stove. For good glory's sake, Sabot, open that door and let me out!"

"Rattlers?"

For a moment there was silence outside, while Sabot apparently digested this. Then suddenly Sabot roared with laughter.

"Rattlers, yuh say? By the great horned spoon, that's a joke. Rattlers!"

And the roar of the giant's brutal laughter swelled louder and louder.

CHAPTER XI

Men of Battle

DISAPPOINTMENT sent a little shock through Hatfield. He had hoped that Sabot would throw open the door and rush into the cabin. Instead, the outlaw guard just stood outside and laughed.

Hatfield kept rushing about the room. He slammed into the walls, and demolished the bunk. Suddenly he let out a terror-filled squawk louder than ever.

"Sabot! One of the critters has bit me! Must be dozens of 'em. I'll die! I can feel the pizen in my blood already! Yuh got to help me!"

Sabot kept on laughing. But now a sudden thrill of hope shot through Hatfield, as he heard the heavy bar scrape against the door. Sabot was opening the door!

"Die, cuss yuh!" he heard the giant growl. "But I want to see it. I want to see yuh twist and crawl on the floor and yore eyes pop out, with them rattlers wrapped about yore gizzard!"

A man with more intelligence would not have fallen for it. But in Sabot's dark mind was only the sadistic anticipation of seeing a man die in agony.

Gray light splashed through the opening as the door swung open. Braced on powerful legs, Hatfield waited for Sabot to step into the doorway. But Sabot did not come in.

"The door's open, bucko," he heard Sabot's jeering voice. "Come out here and die so I can watch it!"

He saw Sabot's huge figure, bulking bearlike back from the door, indistinct in the misty half-light.

The Ranger knew it was now or never. Like a spring uncoiling, he hurled himself through the doorway like a catapult,

driving straight at the bulky figure of Sabot.

Too late, he saw the blacksnake whip in Sabot's hand. He heard its snarling hiss, saw it uncurling, the beaded lash aimed straight for his eyes. He tried desperately to brake to a halt, to twist away from that deadly lash.

It missed his eyes, but he felt searing pain as the lash wrapped itself about his throat. He heard Sabot's wicked snarl of triumph. Then, as the giant jerked on the whip, Hatfield's head was almost torn from his body. He was dragged from his feet and slammed with stunning force against the earth.

"Rattlers, is it?" Sabot yelled. "I been waitin' this chance, bucko!"

He dropped the whip and ran at Hatfield, leaping high in the air with the intention of grinding both boot heels into the prone Ranger's stomach. Hatfield rolled desperately, feeling the slog of the huge man's heels into the dirt an inch from his body. Then he jack-knifed, threw both arms about Sabot's knees and tugged powerfully.

Sabot's triumphant yell was chopped off abruptly as he was slammed against the ground with a jarring thud. Hatfield came over on top of him, driving at Sabot's stomach with his knee, slamming a fist into that broad, snarling face, driving the other fist at Sabot's throat, knowing that this was no time for niceties.

Sabot brought hands and feet up, like a wildcat fighting a dog, and with amazing strength flung the Ranger off him. Hatfield landed on his back, rolled, bounded to his feet, to find Sabot already up and charging at him like a wild grizzly. Fury boiled in the giant's hooded eyes, and his clublike fists were flailing.

Jim Hatfield met the savage charge head-on, and the impact as the two big men came together seemed to jar the very ground. The Ranger slammed at that massive figure with all the strength in his magnificent body. He drove an elbow at Sabot's throat, twisting away to avoid the knee that Sabot aimed at his middle.

A growling moan of pain rumbled from Sabot's thick lips. But he didn't back away. He bored in doggedly, and wrapped his huge hairy arms about Hatfield. He tripped the Ranger and they smashed to the ground.

They rolled about on the damp earth, mauling, slashing, gouging, two huge, bear-strong men locked in titanic combat.

Nick Sabot was a dirty, treacherous fighter, a man who fought with beastlike savagery and cunning. He was not so tall as Hatfield, but thicker of torso. Hatfield could feel the man's cablelike muscles writhing and bulging.

But the Lone Wolf was just as strong, and fierce battles along the wild frontiers of Texas had taught him all the finer points of alley fighting. He knew that there were no halfway measures with a man like Sabot. If Sabot conquered him he was a dead man, or worse.

HE MATCHED Sabot trick for trick and added a few of his own. He battered at the giant's rocklike face as they rolled about on the ground. He speared his knees into Sabot's stomach and gouged at Sabot's hooded eyes.

Having enough of this kind of fighting, Sabot broke away and rolled to his feet. Hatfield came up and leaped at him, seeing the ugly pattern of surprise and pain over Sabot's broad dark face. He stalked the mastodon of a man relentlessly, chopping savage, malletlike blows into Sabot's face, his stomach, his throat.

Sabot reeled backward, his boot heels slamming against the earth, a dazed, hurt look in his wicked eyes. Blood poured from his nose and mouth. His blows, as he fought back at his towering, merciless antagonist, were weaker.

And Hatfield stalked him, pantherlike, with a panther's cold, merciless savagery, a tall, magnificent figure in the gray mist of early morning.

He drove the reeling giant back, back against the cabin logs, and there he finished him, hammering half a dozen deliberate blows into Sabot's battered face that popped like pistol shots. He stepped back, watching Sabot slide with a rasping sound down the wall to the ground. The dark-skinned killer rolled over on his face and lay still.

The Ranger turned away, knowing that each second might be precious. It was almost full daylight now, with the eastern sky red from the sun that would ease above the horizon within moments.

Hatfield's gun-belts with their twin

black guns in the holsters dangled from a peg driven between two cabin logs. He grabbed the belts and strapped them about his lithe waist, already running toward the nearby pole corral. Inside the corral, with a rangy roan, was the Ranger's golden sorrel.

He saw, with a twinge of anger, that the outlaws had left saddle and bridle on Goldy through the night. The sorrel nickered softly as he saw Hatfield, and came toward him.

Suddenly the Ranger braked to a halt.

Several riders were streaming down the sparsely-timbered ridge that lifted a short distance beyond the corral. At their head was Lash Burma. They had seen Hatfield, were spurring recklessly down the slope toward the clearing that cradled the cabin and corral, guns in hand.

The Lone Wolf's indecision was brief. He could hole up inside the cabin and hold off his attackers for a while, perhaps for hours. But there could be but one final ending to a fight against such odds.

He leaped on toward the corral and vaulted over the six-foot-high poles, thankful now that saddle and bridle had not been removed from Goldy. He leaped into saddle.

The riders had vanished momentarily into a thick belt of timber as they reached the foot of the decline, but now they spewed from the screening trees into the clearing. Hatfield saw one rider halt at the edge of the timber, then whirl his mount and ride back out of sight. He could hear this unseen man yelling orders to the others.

Burma and his owlhoot companions raced on toward the corral, the cruel, eager look of hunting dogs on their faces.

"Close in—close in!" Burma bawled. "We've got him hemmed in in that corral. The gate's closed—he can't get away!"

Goldy had seen the riders, had recognized danger. He stood tense, ears flattened, quivering. Hatfield patted the sorrel's glossy neck, leaned forward and spoke softly into the big horse's ear.

Goldy catapulted forward, churning the dust with his hoofs. Eight feet from the corral poles, the big sorrel left the ground and soared into the air, clearing the six-foot-high poles with inches to spare. He landed feather-light, and in a dead run.

Amazement held the renegades silent for a moment. Then Lash Burma squalled furiously.

"Cut him off! Kill that busky! Don't let 'im get away!"

A gun blasted, and a bullet snarled wickedly past the Lone Wolf's head.

The outlaws had swerved their horses, were cutting in to block him off from the timber. Hatfield's guns were in hand now. A slight pressure of his knees swerved the sorrel slightly.

Like a golden thunderbolt, teeth bared, eyes wickedly aglare, the big horse drove straight at the outlaws.

SURPRISED yells erupted from the outlaws' lips. Amazement, then alarm, struck at their faces as they saw the blazing-eyed sorrel and its towering, grim-faced rider slamming headlong at them. They swerved again, scattered.

Only Lash Burma tried to hold his ground. He snarled an oath, and lead-fanged fire spouted from his gun-muzzle. Hatfield felt the burn of the bullet across his cheek.

Suddenly realizing his peril, Burma tried to whirl his dun and get away. But he was too late. The sorrel, running full speed, hoofs churning the earth, hit Burma's smaller horse with incredible force.

The dun was knocked from its feet. Burma hit the ground, and rolled, hoarsely yelling his terror.

Goldy reared, slashed downward with front hoofs at that screaming, scuttling figure. But Burma rolled frantically again and the hoofs missed by bare inches.

Hatfield spoke softly to Goldy again, and the sorrel whirled away from the man on the ground, driving for the nearby belt of timber. The renegades, startled by the boldness and savagery of Hatfield's attack upon their leader, had held their fire.

But now, rallied by Burma's furious cries, they turned their guns on that fast-moving horse and rider. The Ranger, bent low in the saddle, twisted about and blazed lead back at the milling outlaws. One of them slumped forward, then tumbled to the ground. The riderless horse shied away, throwing the mounts of the others into still greater confusion.

Just before Hatfield drove into the tim-

ber, he again glimpsed that shadowy figure that had halted at the edge of the clearing. Who was this rider, and why had he remained back out of sight?

Hatfield thought he had the answer. This rider who had been reluctant to show himself, even when it appeared that Hatfield was hopelessly cornered and doomed, was the Chief, the real boss of the outlaw pack!

CHAPTER XII

Doorway to the Past

STIFLING a reckless impulse to circle through the timber and attempt the capture of the bandit leader, the Ranger kept on his way. For he knew that this would be suicidal. Burma had rallied his men and, guns roaring, they were driving at the spot where Hatfield had vanished into the forest.

Some of the unaimed bullets came perilously close to Jim Hatfield. Thorny branches slapped at his face and ripped at his clothes. He crossed a spiny ridge, and the gunfire died away behind him.

He was not afraid of pursuit. Few horses in all the West could stay within dust-eating distance of the sorrel.

And he knew that to return to the cabin with a posse would be useless. The killer gang would not be there, because it obviously was only a secondary hide-out or way-station. He angled down through the foothills toward the Circle 3, a frown of puzzlement furrowing his brow as he remembered the horseman who had lurked back in the thicket. Who was he? That question was still tormenting the tall Ranger when he rode up to the Circle 3 ranchhouse.

Jim Hatfield's keen mind and powerful body had been conditioned in a stern, harsh school. Where most men would have faltered and fallen by the wayside, he was able to keep going. So, after snatching a couple of hours' sleep at the Circle 3 he was almost fully refreshed. Meanwhile, Goldy had been watered and grained.

Hatfield had already briefed Nan Coffee on the happenings of the night before.

"Miss Nan," he said earnestly, as he mounted the sorrel for the ride on into Perdida, "I wish yuh'd go into town for a few days, where yuh'd be safe. I've got a hunch things are about to bust wide open."

"Nobody would dare come here to the ranch and harm me," she demurred.

"I'm not so shore of that. These jiggers we're up against are not ordinary men. They're human wolves. They're playin' for high stakes, and they'll let nothin' stand in their way of gettin' what they want—nothin'. I know how yuh feel about it, but I don't think it'd be for more'n a couple of days."

"You've located Lash Burma's hide-out?"

He shook his head. "No," he said, and added cryptically, "There're others a lot more dangerous than Lash Burma. How many riders yuh got here?"

"Only three right now."

"Not enough, if things break wrong. I know a sheriff who'd feel powerful bad if somethin' happened to you."

"Well—" Nan hesitated, then smiled up at the big Ranger. "All right. I've got some things to attend to first, but I'll ride into town this afternoon."

"*Bueno!*"

Hatfield grinned, lifted his hat and rode away.

In Perdida, he went directly to Bourke Prine's office. The office door was locked, so the Ranger returned to the street and crossed to the Sapphire. Prine had not been in since the evening before, the bartender told him.

Hatfield had his drink of rye and went out, almost colliding with Sheriff Ben Raven as he went between the batwings.

"Saw yuh come in here," Raven said. "Drink?"

"The one I just had's crawlin' about in my stomach like a tarantula." The Lone Wolf grinned. "Let's go over to yore office."

There he told Ben Raven the story of the happenings the night before.

"Lash Burma's slicker than I figgered," Raven said grimly, when Hatfield had finished. "Yuh think he has yuh tagged for a Ranger?"

"Yes, I think he has," Hatfield said slowly. "And I wonder how he found out?"

"My lip's been buttoned," Raven said, "and I know Nan's has. Bourke Prine's got too much savvy to talk. But Judge Clagg's tongue turns like a windmill when he's guzzlin'."

"The Judge is not supposed to know." The Lone Wolf shrugged. "I'm ridin' out to Don Salzabar's old *hacienda* in a little while. How'd yuh like to come along?"

"I'd like it!" Eagerness brightened the young lawman's eyes. "What yuh figger to find there?"

"Mebbe just bats and buzzards and spiders—and mebbe the answer to what we're lookin' for. Indians are supposed to believe the ruins are haunted and shy clear of 'em, yet there were moccasin tracks in the dust on the floors. And boot tracks. Somethin' mighty queer is goin' on in Mantox Canyon, Raven. Mebbe that's where old Quetzalcoatl, the vampire god, is holed up!"

RAVEN looked sharply at the tall Ranger, but Hatfield's rugged face was deadly serious.

"When yuh aimin' to ride?" the sheriff asked.

"Couple of hours," Hatfield said. "That'll give Goldy time for a little rest, and us time for a good look-see before night. I . . . There's the prosecuting attorney now!"

Raven's gaze followed the Ranger's through an office window. Bourke Prine, a handsome, commanding figure in a dark suit, expensive boots and a flat-crowned cream Stetson, was riding a high-stepping black along the street. Prine rode with the easy grace of a born horseman.

The young prosecuting attorney swung in to the tie-bar in front of the sheriff's office and dismounted.

"Figured I'd find you here, Hatfield," he said pleasantly, as he strode into the office. He sat down, his face tense and serious. His eyes were shadowed with worry. "Quite a ruckus you ran into last night. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I feel partly responsible, I was so confident the note actually had been written by Maxtla, and was not a trick."

The Ranger nodded. "Forget it. No harm done. But how'd yuh find out about it?"

"I just came from the Circle Three. I was out riding and stopped by to see if you'd been there. I was worried because you hadn't showed up. Nan Coffee told me what had happened, and said you'd left there only a few moments before."

"Mebbe Maxtla *did* write the note," Hatfield murmured. "Mebbe he's in cahoots with Burma's crew."

Prine shook his head quickly.

"That isn't likely. Maxtla hates and distrusts all white men. I've got a lot of confidence in your ability to clear up this mess, Hatfield—but you've got to be careful. If that big sorrel of yours hadn't jumped that corral fence you'd be dead now. Then we'd have been right back where we started."

"Not the first tight hole Goldy has pulled me out of." The Lone Wolf grinned. "And won't be the last."

"I hope not. Well, what's the next step?"

"Why, we figgered to take a look-see at them old ruins," Raven spoke up. "Hatfield here figgers a lot of the bad smell is comin' from there."

"Then I hope he finds whatever is causing it!" Prine ran a hand through his wavy yellow hair. He smiled wryly. "A mess like this is bad publicity for a man who has his eyes fixed on the State Senate. . . . Well, I've been away from my office too long. Don't fail to call on me, Hatfield, for anything you need."

The Ranger nodded, and Prine went out.

"There goes a smart hombre," Ben Raven observed admiringly. "I predict he'll go a long ways."

"He's smart, all right," Hatfield agreed. "If we can bust this case mebbe it'll help him to where he's goin'. . . ."

At midmorning a tiny cloud resembling a bluish puff of smoke had appeared on the southern horizon. It had mushroomed steadily in size until now, as Hatfield and Ben Raven rode west from Perdida, it had become a gigantic, sullen-black thunderhead that filled the sky halfway to the zenith. A vast silence held the land as if it cowered in terror and dismay before some nameless, unseen monster—a silence that was occasionally broken by a low growl of thunder deep in the cloud masses.

Raven eyed the thunderhead dubiously.

"Looks like a blow," he predicted. "She don't storm down here often but when she does it's usually a woolly-booger. Notice how quiet and still everything is?"

Hatfield nodded. "Like it is up in the Panhandle just before a blue norther comes whoopin' and bellerin' down off the Rockies. There's a sayin' that in Texas only a fool or a newcomer predicts the weather."

He grinned at the tall young sheriff.

They reached the edge of the foothills where they circled to avoid the Indian village, and passed the spot where the stream boiled from the mountainside. Then they were entering the mouth of Mantox Canyon. The spreading clouds had covered the sun by now, and in the shrouding shadows the spires and weird rock formations looked more than ever like sleeping, gargoylish monsters.

IN CONTRAST to the shrieking wind that had swept the canyon the day before, the place was quiet now. The buzzards lining the parapet and the crumbling wall surrounding the ruins huddled motionless and silent. A scaly armadillo scuttled from under the old wall and into the underbrush.

"Kind of like a graveyard at midnight on a Friday the thirteenth," Raven muttered. "Sayin' is if yuh don't pester ghosts they won't pester you."

"Ghosts don't leave tracks," the Ranger said grimly.

They had reached the ruins now, and pushed through the great oaken portals into the high-ceilinged room. Hatfield pointed to the dusty floor.

"If ghosts did make them boot tracks, they'll also likely pack hoglegs!"

Raven slapped disgustedly at a huge hairy spider which, swinging on a strand that dangled from the ceiling, had brushed against his face. He half-drew his gun as a monstrously huge rat scurried between his feet.

"Ghosts can have the place for all of me," he grumbled. "What yuh reckon the gents who made them boot prints were lookin' for?"

"The same thing we are—the thing for which men have searched this neck of the woods for almost a century, and the thing that caused Jim Coffee's death. The jewels of Quetzalcoatl."

"You think that heathen idol is here among these ruins?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Mebbe, mebbe not. Anyhow, it's plain that others think it. Supposedly, the thing vanished here in this *hacienda*."

"Mebbe the Aztecs hid it somewheres else before they holed up here."

"That's possible. It's also possible that they didn't. That's what I aim to try to find out. I've seen these *haciendas* in Arizona and Mexico, and I know that lots of 'em had secret panels and doorways, where the Spanish grandees hid their valuables, and where they could hide in case of necessity. My idea is to go over this place from top to bottom. If nothin' turns up—well, all we've wasted is a little time."

"Or our hides," the sheriff muttered. "Me, I never took much stock in these tales of hidden treasure."

"Many of 'em are only legends, but some are true," Hatfield said seriously. "A long time ago treasure trains, loaded with bar gold, pigs of silver, loot from wagon trains, even sapphires and pearl necklaces from Mexico's beautiful women, came through here over the old Chihuahua Trail. This was a stompin' ground for renegade whites and Mexicans, and maraudin' Apaches. Many of them pack trains were attacked and looted.

"Nobody knows what became of a lot of that treasure, and I reckon there's not much doubt some of it is still cached back in hidden caves and canyons. Texas is a big place, an empire within an empire, a place where a lot of queer things happen. . . . Well, let's have that look-see. We'll separate, to cover more territory and save time. Keep yore eyes peeled, and if anything shows up give a holler."

Hatfield took the rooms to the right of the long corridor that bisected the old *hacienda*, Raven those on the left. Hatfield worked methodically as he progressed slowly through the dusty, littered rooms, paying scant attention to the lovely tapestries that dangled from the walls, the beautiful paintings that had been slashed and trampled by vandals.

He examined each room with minute thoroughness, tapping the walls and floors with a gun-butt, his keen eyes missing

nothing. He went from room to room, finding nothing unusual. But his conviction that here among these ghostly ruins lay the solution remained unshaken.

In other portions of the *hacienda* he could mark Ben Raven's progress by the hollow thuds of the sheriff's boots. Finally he heard sounds on the rickety stairs that told him Raven was ascending to the top floor.

CHAPTER XIII

The Vampire God

BY NOW Hatfield was in the room that contained the trap-door in the center of the floor. He took hold of the iron ring and lifted the door, revealing, as he had before, a flight of steps that led downward into musty shadows. He had had this cellar in mind from the start and had brought along several pine fagots for the specific purpose of investigating the place.

He ignited one of the fagots and lowered himself through the opening. The steps were creaky, and the fagot sputtered in the musty air that swirled up out of the shadows. Twittering bats brushed like ghostly hands against his face. The silence of a tomb held the place.

At a depth of thirty feet he came to the foot of the stairs. He found himself in a big room, the ceiling of which was lined with brick, the walls with huge flat slabs of stone. Debris littered the flagstone floor. There were boxes, broken bottles, and shattered wine casks. A number of paintings dangled from the walls. On one wall was the mounted head of a giant wild boar, the rotting skin peeling back from skeletal bones.

Hatfield thrust the fagot into a crevice in the floor. He made his thorough search here in the musty depths below the old *hacienda*. He went over the floor, over the walls, inch by inch. He knew that others had made this search before him, for their sign was here in the ancient dust. He could hear the silence of the place, feel its resentment at his intrusion, as if hostile eyes were watching him and hating him.

After thirty minutes, disappointment lay heavily within him. Apparently this had been the old Don's wine cellar, and nothing else. The marks of a century shrouded it.

He stared frowningly at the huge boar's head, scarcely seeing it. The thing's exposed tusks snarled at him silently, its shiny eyes glared wicked hate as it had died glaring hate at those who killed it. Abruptly the beast seemed alive, battling savagely in junglelike growth, slashing, squealing its rage, driving with incredible speed on its stubby legs at its tormenters.

Still frowning, Hatfield went forward and touched the head. It had been riveted in some way to a round protruding knob of rock that seemed a part of the wall. He tested its sturdiness, jiggling it up and down.

When it seemed to give a little, he took hold of the thing with both hands and twisted from side to side. The head, and the protuberance to which it was affixed, turned with a squeaky sound.

Then there was a louder, harsher creaking.

Hatfield leaped backward, hands stabbing downward.

Then he stood very still, staring in wide-eyed amazement. The slab of stone to which the boar's head was affixed was turning slowly, as if on hinges, revealing a doorlike opening in the wall!

The rock slab creaked to a halt. Beyond the head-high opening lay the deep shadows of what appeared to be a rock-walled corridor. In the dark beyond, disturbed bats flitted about in a cloud.

Elation surged through Jim Hatfield. Maybe this secret door and hidden tunnel meant something, maybe not. But it was what he had been hoping and looking for. Impatience to see what this would lead to took hold of him.

He stamped out the smoldering fagot and lit a fresh one. Remembering Raven, he turned toward the stairs, but changed his mind and stepped through the opening into the tunnel. Instantly, as if the flat slab of stone he had trod upon were some kind of mechanism, the door creaked to behind him.

Momentarily startled, Hatfield examined the stone slab from this side. In

its center was an iron ring affixed to a protuberance much like the one on the opposite side of the door, and serving the same purpose as the boar's head.

The Ranger looked curiously about. The tunnel, obviously man-made, was several feet wide and high enough for him to stand without stooping. Its walls were lined with rock slabs, its ceiling shored with timbers. That ancient, musty smell was intensified here, and here the same kind of huge hairy spiders crawled over the walls and dangled on webs from the ceiling.

HATFIELD went slowly along the tunnel, eyes and ears alert. His footsteps echoed hollowly and the torch cast flitting, leaping shadows over the walls. Mammoth rats scurried about his feet. A current of damp air brushed like clammy fingers against his face.

He paused suddenly, his eyes narrowing with sharp interest as they probed the tunnel floor. Coating dust lay thickly here, and in the dust showed unmistakable footprints, many of them!

Hatfield stooped to examine the imprints. They were moccasin tracks, and were of recent origin. Maxtla's followers? Obviously somebody else had discovered the secret door, or there was another entrance to this place.

Tension mounting inside him, the Lone Wolf went slowly forward again. His spine prickled with the feel of danger, the feel of ancient, hostile eyes staring at him hatefully. But he knew that whatever peril lurked here in this subterranean world belonged not to the musty past but to the immediate present.

He rounded a bend in the tunnel—and emerged suddenly into an immense cavern that was like a great gleaming cathedral. His boots, as he braked to a halt, sent clattering, tinkling sounds like the breaking of crystal bulbs over the place.

This cavern was not man-made. It was a natural dungeon deep in the earth, as if a giant hand had scooped it out with splayed fingers. Vast white pillars upheld the vaulted roof, and frostlike tapestries, glowing like iridescent fires in the torchlight, draped the walls. Dangling overhead were giant chandeliers of shining stalactites.

For a long moment Hatfield stood motionless, his eyes photographing the weird place. In the floor of the cavern was a gaping black hole several feet across. To the left of this hole . . .

Again that icy tingle raced along the Lone Wolf's spine, and again his hands stabbed for the black butts of his guns.

He stood utterly motionless, staring at the thing. At the golden image of Quetzalcoatl, the crouched, ugly, leering figure of the vampire god!

The idol gleamed dully in the shimmering light of the torch. It was twice the size of an ordinary man, a hulking, paunchy figure crouched atop a stone pedestal four feet high. Its huge hands, reaching out before it, were like a hawk's talons. Its broad, cruel features were bisected by a beaklike nose that jutted between predatory eyes that held all the world's wickedness and hate and greed. Its bulbous head was wholly bald.

Directly before the idol was a flat, ten-foot-square slab of rock. The thing's muddy eyes were staring down at this altarlike slab.

Hatfield went slowly forward and stood before the sinister idol. A sense of unreality, a feeling that this was a nightmarish dream, enveloped him. But he knew that here was legend come to life—here was the pagan god of an ancient, mysterious race transported to present-day Texas.

The thing seemed to hate and mock him with its dull, lustful eyes. It seemed to snarl its anger at him, and jeer at him with its silent laughter as if at some grim, secret joke. Evil and cruelty incarnate seemed to radiate from it and fill the cavern with a poisonous substance.

But Jim Hatfield's nerves were not easily shaken. He stepped forward, onto the rude altar. And there, once again, he paused, a little shock going through him.

There on the grayish surface of the rock were dark, brownish stains. Not old stains, dimmed by time, but vivid, relatively fresh stains. Blood stains!

A queer feeling in his stomach, the Ranger remembered what Nan Coffee had said of Quetzalcoatl, "On an altar before the image, human sacrifices—usually young and beautiful maidens—were offered to appease its wrath. They be-

lieved that Quetzalcoatl grew angry only when he was hungry, and that his only food was the blood of the victims offered him."

Hatfield's lips tightened and his greenish eyes grew bleak. Darker things, things more sinister and deadly than he had suspected, were entangled in the web of treachery and greed that held this range.

STANDING on the altar, he slid his fingers over the hard, smooth surface of the idol. Legend said that the image of Quetzalcoatl was hollow, that inside it was a rich treasure hoard. If that were true, there had to be some way of gaining entrance.

He slid his fingers over the idol's bulging stomach, shivering at its clammy coldness, up over its thick throat to the gross, leering face. It was logical to suppose that some delicate mechanism, such as controlled the stone door, opened a secret panel somewhere about the idol's anatomy.

Like the sudden clanging of a bell in his brain, a warning of peril came to Hatfield. At the same instant he heard a low, scraping sound behind him.

He whirled away from the idol, the burning fagot in one hand, his other slashing downward. As he wheeled, he glimpsed two men coming out of the deep shadows at the back of the cavern—Indians. He saw the guns in their hands, the cruel masks of their coppery faces.

Hatfield saw flame lash out from one of those guns, and with the speed of a panther he leaped to one side and off the rock altar. He knew exactly where he would land—on the smooth surface of a smaller slab of stone near the gaping hole in the cavern floor.

He heard the wicked snarl of the bullet as it whipped past his cheek. He felt his boots thud against the slab of rock, felt them slip, and fought to regain his balance.

Then he realized that his boots had not slipped, but that his weight had tilted the rock sharply, throwing him forward toward the gaping black hole! He tried desperately to fling himself backward, away from that yawning pit. But the rock slab had tilted too swiftly. His boots slid along the smooth surface and he slammed against the rock with stunning force.

He clawed frantically at the stone as he felt himself sliding toward the hole. But there was no hold for his fingers. His legs jutted over the edge of the rock into space, then the entire lower portion of his body, and with a bitter despair he realized that he could not check his descent.

Then he slid off the rock and fell downward—downward through chill darkness, and somewhere in the inky depths below he thought he heard the sound of running water.

CHAPTER XIV

Tunnel of Doom

NEARING the end of his part of the search of the old *hacienda,* Sheriff Ben Raven opened an upper-story door—and looked into the muzzles of half a dozen guns in the hands of hard-faced, grinning men.

"Stand hooked, Sheriff," Lash Burma said flatly, "or we'll put yuh on a diet of lead plums!"

Shocked into immobility, Raven stood still, realizing bitterly that he had walked into a trap. Burma's renegades had simply sat still and waited for him to come to them. He thought of Hatfield, somewhere on the lower floor, and was thankful that they had separated.

One of the outlaws stepped forward and took the sheriff's gun. Burma shoved him roughly back against a wall.

"Where's this Hatfield?" Burma asked in low, harsh tones.

Raven shrugged. "I ain't keepin' up with him," he said.

"He came here with yuh," growled Burma. "We watched yuh through a window when yuh rode up. We heard yuh talkin' down below a little while ago. Where is he?"

"Find him if yuh want him." Raven purposely raised his voice in an effort to warn the Ranger. "Yuh must have been here waitin' for us. How'd yuh know we were comin?"

"I'll ask the questions, law-dog," Bur-

ma growled. "And don't talk so loud. We'll find Hatfield and make it a double hangin'. Boys, he's somewheres below. Go corral him. But be careful—that big busky's pizen bad!"

"We'll get him," one of the outlaw band said, grinning in wicked anticipation. "Always did crave to know what Ranger meat tastes like!"

The outlaw underlings, five in all, silently left the room. Burma, seated on the floor with his back against the wall, gun in hand, remained with the sheriff. The burly, pale-eyed bandit leader scowled as if dark thoughts seethed in his evil mind.

"How'd yuh know Hatfield was a Ranger?" Raven asked abruptly.

"Shut up!" Burma said angrily. "Yuh're through, badge-toter, you and Hatfield both. Won't neither of yuh bother us ag'in. I aim to see both of yuh kick at the end of a rope!"

Raven said nothing more. He leaned against a door jamb, watching the blond Burma, straining his ears for some sound from below that would tell him Jim Hatfield had been jumped and possibly taken prisoner by the outlaw bunch. But he heard nothing. A deep silence held the canyon, broken occasionally by a low growl of thunder from the dark cloud masses on the southern horizon.

After what seemed to Raven a long time, Burma's men returned to this room. They reported that there was absolutely no sign of Hatfield.

Raven's hopes soared. He had a lot of confidence in the tall, gun-fast Ranger.

"Sheriff's bronc is still outside," one of the outlaws said. "Hatfield's big sorrel's not there, though."

Burma cursed with disappointment.

"Likely he got spooked and pulled out. Well, never mind. We'll get him later."

"What about this tin-badge?"

"We'll dress him up with a hemp necktie. Have to take him outside to do it, though. Nothin' to throw a rope over in here . . . Sheriff, did yuh kiss that purty yeller-haired girl good-by before yuh left town?"

Savage, killing anger boiled inside Ben Raven. But he knew that if he made a crooked move he would be shot down in cold blood. His best bet was to wait, to depend on Jim Hatfield for aid. He knew that the big Ranger hadn't deserted him.

"Step out!" Burma ordered.

Grim-faced, the young lawman obeyed, going out the door and down the stairs, followed by the laughing, jostling owl-hoots. They made no effort at secrecy now, confident that Hatfield had fled the vicinity.

They tramped along the corridor, out the front door and over the worn flagstones of the driveway. Raven's buckskin was where he had left it, tied to one of the leaning iron posts from which the gate sagged. Hatfield's sorrel, which the Ranger had left ground-hitched, had vanished.

Raven felt a stab of doubt. Had Hatfield, after all, pulled out and left him to his fate?

A SHIVER, caused not altogether by the weird, gloomy atmosphere of Mantox Canyon, slithered along the young sheriff's spine. The dark cloud still lay like a moving shroud across the southern sky, shifting and boiling slightly from the wind that had risen. That wind swept strongly through the canyon, seeming almost like a live thing as it cried and shouted among the trees, causing them to fling up their armlike branches like men trying desperately to ward off a savage adversary.

"Hit leather!" Burma ordered. "There's a clump of cottonwoods out close to the canyon mouth."

With a last furtive glance about, Raven again obeyed. They moved away from the ruins and into the hemming timber. Raven was in the lead, with his captors following closely, keeping wary eyes on him. They were in a jocular mood, obviously anticipating sadistic pleasure from the task ahead.

"Boss ought to give us a bonus for this," one of them said, grinning. "He's one smart bucko."

"So is this Jim Hatfield," another remarked, less confidently. "My gullet won't stop itchin' till he's six feet under!"

Ben Raven's alert eyes and mind were busy as they pushed through the dense, shadowy timber. He knew that he was in the tightest spot of his life. He knew about the clump of cottonwoods Burma had mentioned, and he knew with a poignant misery that when that spot was

reached his life span would be measured in seconds.

He glanced furtively over his shoulder. Lash Burma was the nearest to him. Burma was taking no part in the noisy conversation. The blond outlaw leader's pale eyes were riveted on Raven's back, and his steel-trap lips curved downward.

The earth here lay in deep shadows, with the wind making a wild racketing sound like jeering laughter in the canopy overhead. Underneath the taller trees was a dense growth of cedars. They had to reach out their hands to break a way through the thicket. The cottonwoods lay no more than a hundred feet ahead.

With a painful certainty Raven knew that now he could not count on Jim Hatfield for aid.

"Mebbe," Lash Burma jeered, as if he had been turning this in his evil mind, "I'll have to comfort that yeller-haired Coffee gal when—"

He broke off with a startled squawk. Raven had bent a cedar branch far back, and now he ducked, releasing it. It switched over his head and whipped hard across Burma's face.

Burma cursed, reeled in his saddle, clawing at his eyes. The movement caused him to jerk violently on his reins, and his horse reared, half-whirled and crashed into those directly behind it.

As Raven released the branch, he had yelled and slammed steel to his buckskin. The wiry animal catapulted forward. Raven swerved the buckskin to the left, into cedars that were still more dense. Behind him he could hear the yelling and cursing of the bandits as they fought their frightened horses. He knew that the stinging cedar needles were slapping at the heads and eyes of the animals, driving them to still greater confusion.

Guns started blasting back there. Slugs snarled and snapped past the lawman's head, showering him with cedar needles. He ducked low, swerved the buckskin again and headed toward the mouth of the canyon, confident that the crashing of the outlaws' horses would drown sounds of his own passage through the thickets. He fled through the windy shadows, gunless, but knowing that his chances for escape were better than even.

* * * * *

It seemed to Jim Hatfield that he fell endlessly through chill, Stygian shadows. The rushing passage of air roared in his ears and he sensed rather than saw or felt the rock walls hemming him in, although once his shoulder struck with numbing force against rock.

Inside the Lone Wolf was the bitter knowledge that here, barring a miracle, was the death that he had faced and eluded so many times before.

Then he plunged, head-first, into water that he could not see. As he slashed downward through the icy water, he thrust out his hands to protect his head, and felt them drive jarringly against smooth, slimy rock. He doubled his powerful body, like a fish flipping over, and struck upward.

His head cleft the surface. His mind reeled from his fall and his smashing contact with the water.

A droning sound was in his ears and he could feel a strong pull at his body as if from unseen hands.

He was in utter darkness. Looking upward, he saw only blackness there, too. Then he realized that he had dropped the blazing fagot when the flat stone had tilted, and that unless the Indians up there had made a light the huge cavern would be in shadows.

THE Ranger shook his head to clear it, trying to piece together the events of the last few moments. The hidden doorway, the cathedral-like cavern, the nightmarish vampire god staring with malignant eyes down at its blood-stained altar. The two Indians, and the tilting stone that had cast him down into this dark pit. And he couldn't be sure he was not asleep, in the throes of a horrible dream.

He bumped into something, reached out a hand and clutched a rough edge of rock. His boots found another protruding slab and he rested there, braced against the tug of the current. His shoulder ached with sharp pain.

His head was clear now and he knew it was not a dream. His brain started working with a keen, coordinated precision.

In a pocket Jim Hatfield had a small steel match box that was water-proof. He took out this box and opened it with his teeth, careful to keep its contents away from the water that trickled down

his face. He removed several of the matches, holding them between his teeth, and replaced the box.

He scratched one of the matches on the rock, holding it above his head. The match sputtered, throwing out a weak, yellow glow over the dripping black walls of a rocky tunnel. The tunnel was perhaps twenty feet wide, and filled from wall to wall with dark, swirling water. The walls, although wet and slimy, were not smooth, but saw-toothed, with tiny protruding ledges.

The walls made a curvature overhead, forming a roof which at its highest was no more than five feet above the black water.

Beyond the flickering matchlight, in both directions, the underground stream vanished into impenetrable darkness. Above Hatfield, and slightly behind him, was the funnel-like tunnel down which the Ranger had fallen from the sacrificial cave.

The base of this perpendicular tunnel was several feet above the water, and within the shallow circle of light its walls showed smooth and dark. There were no steps up the tunnel, nothing. Even if he could reach its base, it would be wholly impossible to scale the walls to the cavern above.

The match winked out, and the Lone Wolf clung there to the wet rocks, chilled by the swirling water, cudgeling his brain for some way out of this predicament. But there was no foreseeable way out. He had no way of knowing from whence this stream came nor where it went.

One thing was certain. He could not go back the way he had come. His salvation, if there was any, lay in following the course of the stream in the dismal hope that some channel of escape would open. His enemies now were not Indians or Lash Burma's owlhoots, but this rushing water, the cold blackness and rock walls of this fantastic subterranean prison.

He released his hold on the rocks and drifted with the current, treading water, keeping within reach of the wall.

At times he could walk on rock bottom, at others the water was well over his six-feet-four inches. Once he was drawn into a fierce whirlpool that wheeled him round and round with dizzying speed, then cast him outward with savage violence and against a boulder in placid water.

Dazed, breathless, he clung to the wet rock. The water surged against him. It tore at his legs, shouting and wrestling him as a human adversary would have done.

CHAPTER XV

Out of Night's Darkness

GRIM-EYED, Jim Hatfield scratched another match. In the dim glare the darkness seemed to retreat slowly, sullenly, for a few yards, where it crouched waiting for the match to go out. The stream, he thought, had narrowed somewhat, the curved roof had dropped lower over the water.

"What if the roof crowds down too low to allow passage?" he thought bleakly. But there was no turning back now.

He turned loose of the boulder and drifted with the current again. His boots were on the rocks now, but the current seemed swifter. Its hollow booming filled his ears.

Big Jim Hatfield had suffered momentary defeat many times before this and, like any fighting man, he hated even that. Always, after each set-back, he had continued the fight, and always his raw courage, his magnificent strength, his lightning guns and mauling fists had brought victory.

But this looked like utter and final defeat. His great strength could battle the current's wicked treachery, but neither that nor his courage could beat an enemy that was unbeatable.

Suddenly he felt something that was like a clubbed fist against his head. He stumbled, ducked his head, and found that it was underwater. He had been easing along with water up to his chin, fighting to remain upright against the current's strong fury.

He stopped instantly, some of the water's bleakness seeming to seep through to his heart. He fished for another match and scratched it—and saw that what he had feared was grim reality.

The tunnel roof where he stood was no more than a foot above the churning water. Worse still, ten feet away the tunnel narrowed abruptly to a bare half-dozen feet, and the roof crowded down, so that the tunnel became a solid wall of churning, leaping, snarling water!

"Looks like trail's end," murmured the big Ranger. "Nothin' but a fish could go any farther!"

As the match winked out he huddled there in the ink-black tunnel, thinking with a desperate calm. A booming like the continuous rolling of giant drums beat in his ears. The water swirled about him with a speed much greater than at any other spot, as if hurrying to crowd through the narrowed tunnel.

Hatfield had no way of knowing how far he had traveled since tumbling into the pit, nor in what direction the underground stream had carried him. But now a thought that had been in his mind from the start was crystalizing to certainty.

This subterranean stream, he was fairly sure, was the same one that plunged from the mountainside below Mantox Canyon. And if that were true, here directly before him was undoubtedly the spot where the water surged forth with its roar of freedom from darkness into sunlight!

Hatfield struck another match, excitement and hope stirring inside him, and examined the spot where water seemed to merge with solid rock. The water crowded through with a snarl and a shout, foaming whitely against the dark rock. The Ranger's conviction grew stronger. If he could swim through that water tunnel and let himself be dropped into the pool below, he might have a chance!

But he had no way of knowing how far the water-choked tunnel extended before leaping into the open. Ten feet—or a hundred yards? The first might mean life, the latter certain death.

But death here was just as certain. He couldn't stay here, and he couldn't go back.

Jim Hatfield was just as quick to make a decision, when his life hung in the balance, as he would have been on whether or not to take a drink.

He took a final look as he held the match aloft. Then he drew into his powerful lungs all the breath they would hold —and lunged straight toward the spot where water and rock met!

Just before reaching the spot, he ducked under. The cold water seemed to grab him with a howl of glee and jerk him forward. It pulled him between gaping, slavering rock jaws, and in utter darkness it whirled him over and over like a pinwheel.

He had no control at all over his movements. He could hear nothing, see nothing, but he knew he was being hurled forward through the narrow tunnel at terrific speed. He was tossed this way and that, upward, downward, sideward. Several times he was slammed against rock with numbing force.

HE SEEMED to be driven relentlessly through a dark, tumultuous night of Titantic fury. He lost all sense of time and distance. But his lungs had begun to ache and burn and great weights were pressing against his eardrums.

He was hurled head-first against a wall. A purple mist clouded his brain, and a dismal gray certainty of defeat flooded through him.

Then suddenly he felt himself flung outward — suddenly and amazingly a bright light speared into his eyes. He was falling, with a golden mist of spray engulfing him. He pulled his lungs full of sweet, pure air.

And he plummeted down into the clear, placid pool at the base of the walls.

He sank only inches and came up swimming. A moment later he sat on the rocks rimming the pool, bone-weary, but filled with a deep gratitude for his deliverance. His guns were gone, and so was his hat. But, miraculously, he was alive.

He remembered Sheriff Ben Raven then, and got unsteadily to his feet. How much time had elapsed since he had found the secret door and entered the tunnel? An hour, he figured, although it could easily have been twice that, or only half as much. He saw that the spreading cloud had blotted out the sun, that the wind had risen and moaned through the writhing trees.

"By the jumpin' blue blazes, Jim Hatfield!" a voice said. "Where in all thunderation'd yuh disappear to?"

Hatfield whirled and saw Sheriff Ben Raven ride into the clearing that held the waterfall. Raven was riding his buckskin, and behind him he led the Ranger's big sorrel, Goldy. The young sheriff's face was sober, Hatfield saw, and his holsters were empty.

Raven rode forward, showing his amazement as he looked at the big Ranger.

"Where's yore guns and hat?" he demanded. "And do yuh always go swimmin' with yore clothes on?"

"Just when I don't have any choice," Hatfield said, and grinned. "Where yuh goin' with my bronc?"

"Nowhere. I was comin' with him. I found him out in the timber a few minutes ago. The critter let me catch him, but when I started for town, he got stubborn and kept pullin' in this direction. So I tagged along!"

"Course he did. He wouldn't go off and leave me, which seems like you was fixin' to do. And where's yore hoglegs?"

"Burma's skungeroos got 'em!" Raven said grimly. "They were fixin' to put a hemp necktie on me. It was after I made a break that I found—"

"Hold it," the Lone Wolf said, swinging into saddle. "If Burma's crew are in this neck of the wood we'd better get out of it pronto, us bein' without smokepoles. We can unravel some palaver as we ride along. I've got a hunch we don't have much time to lose."

They rode out of the clearing and along the stream, eyes and ears alert, for if they were jumped now they would have to depend altogether on speed for escape. The Lone Wolf smiled with a grimness that boded evil for his enemies as he glanced covertly from Raven to himself.

The young lawman was gunless, dishevelled, his face scratched and blood-smeared from the thorny thickets through which he had fled in his dash for freedom. Hatfield himself was gunless, hatless, bruised, his clothes water-soaked.

"We make a sorry-lookin' pair," he said reflectively. "First, suppose yuh tell me what happened to yuh, then I'll unload."

Grimly, Raven recounted his capture by Burma's outlaws, and his subsequent escape.

"They know yuh're a Ranger," he declared. "And they were waitin' in that old *hacienda* for us, which means they knew we were headed there."

The Ranger nodded.

"Things are tyin' in, like pieces fittin' into a puzzle. I think I've found most of the pieces. All we've got to do now is put 'em together, which is liable to be a man-size job. Listen to this!"

AND in vivid detail he revealed what had happened to him, told of the secret doorway, the leering image of the Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl, the blood-stained altar, the two Indians, his fall into the underground stream, and his fantastic escape.

"Now we are shore of several things," he said with finality. "First, Quetzalcoatl and the story of the band of adventurers who stole the golden image of the Aztec god from a temple on the shores of Lake Tezcuco is more than legend. Mebbe the idol is filled with precious jewels, mebbe not. The Aztec war party that trailed the Americans up out of Mexico made their last stand in Don Salzabar's *hacienda*. Before bein' wiped out they found—or forced the Don to tell about—the secret passageway into the underground tunnels, and dragged the idol in there and hid it."

"What about old Maxtla and his tribe, and the fresh blood on the altar?" Raven asked.

"There's little doubt, in my mind at least, that Maxtla's tribe are descendants of the party that came up from Lake Tezcuco lookin' for the idol, and found it. But instead of takin' the thing back to Tezcuco, they placed it on a pedestal before a rude altar in that secret cave where they found it, and went on with their heathen worship of the vampire god. No tellin' how many people have died on that altar!"

The sheriff's face was pale. "Shorely yuh don't believe in such hogwash!" he protested.

Hatfield shook his head.

"I don't believe in it, but I believe it has happened, and still is happenin'! That's why the Indians have tried to keep folks away from Mantox Canyon. Burma don't know about the secret door, but he suspects that old Maxtla knows where the idol is hid, just as he suspected

that Jim Coffee had discovered it. Or mebbe the Indians killed Coffee. He's dead, so it's not important right now who killed him. Given time, though, Burma would uncover the idol, then there'd be a wipe-out fight between his crew and the Indians. We're not goin' to give him that time!"

Suddenly Ben Raven slammed a fist into his palm. "By glory, I just remembered!" he exclaimed. "I heard one of them buskies mention a Big Boss, and Lash Burma was with 'em at the time. What yuh reckon he meant?"

"That Burma is takin' orders from somebody himself," Hatfield said calmly. "I've suspected that for some time."

"Who yuh think it is?"

"Bourke Prine!"

CHAPTER XVI

The Pot Boils

RAVEN wheeled his horse to a halt and stared incredulously at the big, grim-faced Ranger.

"Has that heathen god drove you loco, Hatfield?" he demanded. "Why, Bourke Prine's prosecutin' attorney, one of the best-liked and most respected gents in this part of Texas! Or mebbe yuh're jokin'?"

"I'm not jokin'!" Hatfield said soberly. "There's a bare chance I'm mistaken, but I don't think so. How many people knew we were headed out to the old *hacienda* today?"

Raven's eyes narrowed with thought. "Why—why, just you and me, and Bourke Prine, I reckon. By heck-and-Hannah, Hatfield, mebbe yuh're right! And only three besides you were supposed to know about you bein' a Ranger —Nan and me, and Prine. Yet Burma's hellions knew it, and looks like they've known it all along. My mouth's been buttoned, and I know Nan's has. Looks like it boils down to Bourke Prine. And I told him we were headin' out to the ruins, which nearly made cold side-meat out of both of us!"

"I was pretty shore of Prine even before that," Hatfield said quietly. "I saw a sample of Prine's writin', and it matched pretty well with that on the note old Maxtla was supposed to have written. But I wasn't real shore till we talked with Prine in yore office before headin' out for the ruins. Yuh remember what he said after I'd told him about my escape from Burma's crew when they almost cornered me in the corral at the cabin in the hills?"

"Can't say that I do."

"He said, 'Yuh've got to be careful. If that big sorrel of yores hadn't jumped that corral fence yuh'd be dead now.' "

"Yuh didn't say anything to me about that critter jumpin' a corral fence."

"Nor to anybody else! Not even to Nan, and he said he knew about what had happened from her. I didn't mention seein' a busky that stayed pretty well out of sight back in the timber while the ruckus was goin' on, either. I knew that that rider was the real leader of the gang. There was somethin' familiar about him, but I couldn't quite place him —till Prine gave himself away there in yore office."

Raven seemed stunned, almost unable to digest the full sordidness of what he had just heard. He was a man of hard and fast virtues, of iron convictions about right and wrong.

"Bourke Prine," he muttered. "I thought he was my friend. Everybody has always considered him an upright man fightin' for right and justice. They trusted him, and chose him to fight their battles, to uphold the laws of Texas. A thief, a killer, with the black heart of a wolf!"

"The good and the wicked," Jim Hatfield said softly, "walk through the sunlight and the dark together, each toward his own fate, and sometimes it's hard—"

He broke off, and sat very still, listening. The sound was low, but distinct.

"Sounds like a bell," Raven said.

They both looked upward, and there against the darkening sky, slightly to the south, a lone buzzard wheeled in slow circles.

"The belled buzzard!" Raven said excitedly. "When it comes closer, we've got to down the critter and find out what's tied to its leg!"

"What with?" Hatfield asked drily. "A rock?"

They watched the vulture as it made its leisurely circles. It came no closer, and at times the silvery chiming of the bell was inaudible.

Suddenly a rifle shot crashed, off in the timber to the south. Watching the buzzard, they saw it falter, flap wildly for a moment, then plummet earthward end over end. Abruptly it vanished from sight in the timber.

Dimly, they heard the sound of shouting voices.

"Burma's sidewinders!" the sheriff cried angrily. "They've beat us to it!"

"Looks like," the Lone Wolf agreed calmly. "Which means we've got to jump fast. Let's head for Perdida!"

JUDGE CLAGG'S pendulous jowls trembled as he left the Sapphire and hurried along the street toward Bourke Prine's office over the bank. Excitement burned in his fat-buried eyes, and he jumped nervously as thunder crashed and lightning fanged through the boiling clouds.

Glancing furtively along the almost deserted street, the Judge wallowed up the outside stairway, along the corridor, and burst into the prosecuting attorney's office without knocking. Prine, sitting with his well-shod feet upthrust on his desk, and with a deep frown clouding his handsome face, glared with open irritation at Judge Clagg.

"Blast you, Clagg, I wish you'd stop stampeding in here every few minutes," he said harshly. "I've got enough to worry about without listening to your drunken babblings!"

Judge Clagg had collapsed into a chair and was puffing hard after his exertion. He waved a jeweled hand excitedly.

"News, great news, my good man! Astounding news! Oblige me with a drink first, will you?"

Prine glanced sharply at the fat man, opened a desk drawer and drew forth a bottle. Judge Clagg drank noisily, lowered the bottle, waved the fat hand again.

"Fine news, my boy, unbelievable news!"

"Come to the point, curse you!" Prine said savagely. "What gossip have you scooped up out of the gutter now?"

"Haw! Gossip, you think? Look!

Judge Clagg took from a vest pocket a slip of frayed, soiled paper and shoved it at Prine. Prine glanced scowlingly at the paper, then started violently and slammed his polished boots against the floor as he read the almost illegible words scrawled with a pencil on the paper:

Am dying—shot by Burma's hellions. Want secret of Aztec treasure hiding place—in cave under old ruins—secret panel in wine cellar opened by boar's head. Careful—Maxtla's heathens use place to worship vampire god Quetzalcoatl. Tell Nan.

The name of Jim Coffee was signed waveringly at the bottom of the paper.

Bourke Prine leaped to his feet and towered over Judge Clagg. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"Virg Lee, one of Burma's riders, slipped it to me in the Sapphire a few minutes ago. My keen mind immediately grasped its vital import. Here, my fine fellow, I told myself, is the—"

Prine seized the front of the Judge's rusty suit and shook him violently.

"Where did Lee get it, blast you?" he snarled.

"The b-belled buzzard!" Judge Clagg spluttered. "They killed it, found this paper tied to its leg. You think it is genuine? You think the information is correct?"

"I certainly do!" Prine snapped. "I was confident from the start, after Burma told me what happened just before Coffee died, that the belled vulture held the secret of Quetzalcoatl's gold. This is Coffee's dying message. He tied this message, along with the bell, to the buzzard he'd captured, knowing that the bell would attract attention to the vulture and that sooner or later somebody would kill it out of curiosity. We could have had the treasure weeks ago if we'd been able to kill the cursed thing! Did Virg Lee say whether they'd killed Hatfield and Raven at the old *hacienda?*"

"No, by godfrey, they didn't! Both got away."

Prine cursed with fury. He opened another drawer and took out a gun-belt that held a silver-handled .45, and flung it about his lithe waist.

"Har-ru-mp!" Judge Clagg unended the bottle again. "Whither now, my friend?"

"Where do you suppose, you fat walrus?" Prine spat. "We've got to round

up the gang and work fast. Jim Hatfield is smart, mighty smart, and the sheriff's no fool once his eyes have been opened. I think Hatfield has been suspicious of me almost from the start." He swore again, venomously. "Yes, I'm almost sure he has me spotted. I underestimated him, and made several breaks —a bad one this morning."

The Judge heaved to his feet, his whisky-red eyes ablaze with greed. He struck a dramatic pose.

"Then I ride with you! On to the *hacienda* of the good Don Salzabar—on to the riches of Quetzalcoatl!"

"Better take the bottle," Prine sneered. "Better take half a dozen. You might need 'em. . . ."

ALTHOUGH the unseen sun was not yet down, purple shadows were slinking down out of the Chisos when Hatfield and Raven reached Perdida. Raven's buckskin had thrown a shoe and this had delayed them.

The continuing wind had lifted the cloud masses and started them boiling northward. Lightning flamed redly across the dark and sullen sky, and thunder roared and rumbled like the bombardment of giant cannon. Storm smell was in the wind.

The Ranger and the sheriff went quickly and grimly about the task at hand. Hatfield gave Goldy a light feed of grain and water. From his warbag he took a fresh hat, another pair of long-barreled .45s with worn, black butts. Raven rearmed himself.

They went to Bourke Prine's office, only to find it dark, the door locked. Then they crossed to the Sapphire, where they asked about Prine.

"Ain't seen him since noon," the barkeep declared. "Judge Clagg? He was here less'n an hour ago, gettin' drunk as a fiddler crab. Trouble?"

"Might call it that," Hatfield said, and they went back out into the windy street.

They went to the hotel where Prine had two rooms.

"Mr. Prine and Judge Clagg went up to his rooms half an hour ago," the clerk told them. "But they came down almost at once, and left. They seemed in a hurry. Any word you'd like to leave?"

Hatfield shook his head, his lips tightening grimly.

"It's pretty plain that Judge Clagg is in this, too," the Ranger said, after he and the sheriff were back in the street. "Somethin' has happened—somethin' to make them move fast."

"What?" Raven asked.

"Mebbe word that the trap baited at the ruins failed to make us cold meat. But I think not. Probably whatever message it was tied to the belled buzzard's leg was brought to 'em. If it's what I think it is—Jim Coffee's dyin' message—then Prine and the Judge have gone after the jewels of Quetzalcoatl!"

"Holy purple cow! Yuh think they know about the secret cave, and how to get into it?"

The Lone Wolf nodded grimly. "That'd be my guess. And if we aim to—"

He broke off, peering through the shadows at a horse and rider that came into the lower end of the street and raced along it. Lightning crackled and writhed across the heavens, and in its sullen red light the horse and rider were etched clearly.

"Somethin' wrong!" Hatfield snapped, and ran into the street, followed by Raven.

The rider came on toward them. He was bent low in the saddle, quirting the horse, which was running at a reeling, crow-hoppy gallop.

"That's Joe Crump, one of Nan Coffee's riders!" Raven cried out, and ran in front of the horse, waving his arms.

The horse came to a slithering halt, its hoofs geysering up dust. The rider drew himself partially erect in the saddle and peered at them, swaying a little.

His voice was a harsh croak. "That you, sheriff?"

CHAPTER XVII

Quetzalcoatl

LEAPING forward, Hatfield took hold of the blocky rider and eased him to the ground. He felt something wet and sticky on the rider's shoulder, and knew the man was wounded. He could hear Crump's quick, ragged breathing.

"Steady," the Ranger murmured. "What's wrong?"

Before the Circle 3 rider could answer, Raven burst out:

"Great glory, Joe, what's happened?"

"That ravine that comes out of the timber and runs past the barn," the puncher mumbled. "The hellions sneaked up the ravine and hit us—Slim, old Limpy and me—before we knew what was happenin'. We put up what fight we could, which wasn't much. Slim and Limpy are dead, and they must have figgered I was, too, for they left me layin' in the dust before the bunkhouse. When I come to—"

"Nan! What about Nan?" It was almost a groan that was torn from Raven's lips. "Was she there?"

"Miss Nan was just saddlin' to start for town," Joe Crump went on hoarsely. "Last I remember half a dozen of the snakes has hold of her and she was fightin' 'em. When I come to, they were gone, and so was Miss Nan. I reckon they took her away."

Ben Raven swore with savage, incredible fury, his pale face upturned to the sullen sky.

"Curse Lash Burma's black soul to ever-lastin' perdition!" he cried. "When I—"

"Wait!" Hatfield said, almost roughtly. "Don't go off half-cocked, Raven. I'm not shore it was Burma." He said to Crump, who had sagged against the horse, "Who was it, feller?"

"Indians!" the puncher bit out furiously. "Some of Maxtla's crew. I recognized some of 'em."

"They say anything before the attack?"

"Not a word. Just started shootin'!"

"We're wastin' time!" Raven raged. "We'll burn their hogans and wipe the swine out! We'll need a posse!"

"Shut up, Raven!" the tall Ranger spat curtly. "Yuh're talkin' wild. I'll give the orders, or I'll ride alone. Savvy?"

The Lone Wolf's rough, flat tone sobered Raven. He struggled a moment with his wild emotions.

"Sorry, Hatfield," he said huskily. "Yuh're givin' the orders. I've got a dally on my mind now."

"I savvy how yuh feel," Hatfield said quietly. "There may not be time for a posse. I think I know what the Indians are up to. They're Aztecs, remember, not Apaches."

A couple of punchers had come up and were listening curiously to what the three were saying.

"You buskies take Joe Crump over to the Sapphire," Hatfield said to them, "give him a couple of drinks, then call a sawbones. Crump'll explain what's happened. Then get a posse together, as big a one as yuh can and as quick as yuh can, and ride like the devil was on yore backs for the old ruins in Mantox Canyon. Yuh know where that is?"

"We shore as tunket do."

"When yuh get there, come down into the wine cellar. By that time yuh'll know what to do. Hump it, pronto!"

The two punchers took hold of the wounded Circle 3 rider and started toward the Sapphire with him.

"Wish I could ride with you buskies," Joe Crump groaned back over his shoulder. "Miss Nan—I done all I could."

"What now?" Ben Raven asked tautly.

"We're ridin', like old Satan was on *our* coat-tails!" Hatfield rapped. "Get a fresh bronc and plenty shells. I'll meet yuh in front of yore office in five minutes!"

The sheriff started running along the street, a weird figure in the dust that the wind whipped up. Jim Hatfield turned with great strides toward the livery. In the red glow from a lightning flash, his rugged face seemed carved from stone, his eyes showed like slivers of green ice.

This night, he knew, would bring the showdown. It would bring victory, or final defeat—and the odds were a hundred to one against victory. But over the breadth of mighty Texas the Lone Wolf had met such odds many times before, had rushed eagerly to meet their challenge.

Nan Coffee was in no less danger because she was in the hands of Maxtla's band instead of Lash Burma's cutthroats. And the fact that the Indians were not lawless criminals, measured by white man's standards, made not the slightest difference. Maxtla and his followers were more Aztec than Apache, and could have but one reason for abducting Nan Coffee.

THE hair rose on the back of Hatfield's neck as he thought of that reason.

He knew Aztec lore and custom.

It was almost full night now, as Hatfield and Raven rode fast out of Perdida, a weird, tumultuous night filled with the promise of violence. The wind slammed and mauled at them. The cloud masses, like black mountain battlements, boiled almost above them. Lightning blazed its red challenge out of these masses, and thunder crashed and bellowed.

The storm was almost upon them.

"Yuh're still givin' the orders, Hatfield!" Raven yelled. "But yuh told the posse to ride to the old *hacienda*. What makes yuh think the Injuns'll take Nan there?"

"Because that's where the vampire god, Quetzalcoatl, is!" Hatfield answered bluntly.

For a moment Raven failed to grasp the significance of this. Then he showed the Ranger a bitter, desperate face in the lightning's flare, and laid quirt to the fresh dun he rode. Although Goldy had covered a lot of ground that day, the golden sorrel had little difficulty matching the dun's pace.

They rode in silence, for the wind made talking difficult. The plain was black, except when the lightning flamed. Thunder was like the tramping of giants in battle across the sky. In the bursts of red light the Chisos showed like black prehistoric monsters against the sky.

The wind stilled suddenly, and in the vast silence a few drops of rain pattered against the parched earth. Then the wind came again, yowling and clawing like a mad puma across the plain, and rain came with it in driving, blinding sheets.

The two riders had donned their slickers. With slackened pace they rode on through the tormented night, driven by a desperate urgency. They slogged through mud that had moments before been sand; they crossed gullies which within the same space of time had become bankful with surging, muddy water.

They came to the base of the timbered foothills and went on without pause, the rain driving at them like a million tiny silver spears. Once Jim Hatfield had been over terrain he could cover it again blindfolded. They came to the stream, to the spot where it surged from the earth's bosom—and Mantox Canyon lay before them.

They rode without hesitation into its gaping, grinning mouth. Here, funneling through the pass, the wind hit them with renewed force. It crashed among the trees and howled a dirge among the rock spires.

Between lightning flashes, they were forced to feel and fight their way through the boulders and dense thickets. Thunder boomed and rocketed among the cathedral-like formations. When lightning writhed across the sullen sky the spires and walls were shrouded in a weird glare.

Mantox Canyon, caught in this mighty battle of the elements, seethed and trembled and bellowed, a violent place of lurid red flames and evil-filled shadows.

Hatfield suddenly yelled something at Raven, and pointed. There before them lay the old ruins, like the rotting bones of a skeleton in the rain and eerie light.

HIS lips close to Raven's ear, the Ranger yelled:

"We'll leave our broncs here in the thicket and go on afoot. We'll pretty soon know whether I played the wrong hunch!"

Leaving the tethered horses, Hatfield paused on the edge of the clearing and when the lightning blazed he studied the scene before him carefully. There was no sign of movement or life about the *hacienda* ruins. Crimson serpents of lightning twisted in and out of the gaping windows and over the pillars.

"Come on—come on!" Raven urged, his young face haggard and drawn with worry.

"Easy," the Ranger cautioned. "A wrong move might ruin everything. Follow me!"

He led the way, swiftly and without stealth now, across the flagstones of the driveway and through the great oaken portals. Not even the giant rats were astir now. The ruins were as still as a grave. Flickering lightning glow jumped through the windows to play over the walls.

By this weird light Hatfield led the way into the next room, along the corridor to the room where the trap-door opened onto the steps leading downward to the wine cellar. The trap-door was closed. Still there was no sound except the

screaming wind, the patter of the rain, the rough trampling of the thunder across the tormented sky.

HATFIELD lifted the trap-door and they descended the steps into the cellar. The lightning did not penetrate to here, and the only light was a match in the Lone Wolf's hand. The cellar was as Hatfield had first seen it, with the secret panel closed.

"Looks like we played 'em wrong," Ben Raven said raggedly. "There's nobody here. Likely the red devils carried her somewhere."

"Too soon to decide that," the Ranger grunted.

The boar's head snarled down at them from the wall. Hatfield took hold of the head, twisted slowly but firmly. There was a creaking, grating sound, and the wall panel slid slowly open.

Hatfield had dropped the match, plunging the cellar into darkness. He now stood in utter blackness, twin guns in hand. He had heard the grating sound, and knew the panel stood open, but he could see nothing, hear nothing.

Raven drew in his breath sharply with disappointment.

"Hatfield, I told yuh—"

"Sh-h!" The Ranger's warning whisper cut the darkness like a knife. "That's just the tunnel beyond that door. The cave's farther along."

A match flared in his hand, revealing the open panel. Hatfield stepped through into the tunnel, followed by Ben Raven. The panel creaked to behind them. By now Hatfield had extinguished the match and they stood again in darkness.

The place was dank, musty, quiet.

"No more light," the Ranger whispered. "Hold onto my belt and we'll soon know!"

He felt Raven's hand touch his gunbelt and he went slowly along the tunnel, feeling his way. Rats scampered about their feet here. The darkness seemed an evil, cloying substance crowding in upon them.

The Ranger stopped so suddenly that Raven bumped into him.

A dim, wavering glow of light showed in the tunnel ahead of them. That light glow, Hatfield knew, marked the cavern of the vampire god Quetzalcoatl.

Excitement and relief lifted inside the Lone Wolf. His hunch had been correct! If only they were not too late!

"The cave's just ahead," he whispered in Raven's ear. "At one side of the entrance is a line of boulders. We'll try to get behind them boulders and take a look-see at what's happenin'."

They started easing forward again, silent as stalking cougars. The light grew steadily stronger, and now they could hear voices—a wordless, chanting sound.

In a moment they crouched behind the line of waist-high boulders lining one wall at the entrance to the sacrificial cave, and peered over them into the cave. They stared aghast at the weird, barbaric scene before them.

CHAPTER XVIII

Death Ritual

EERILY, the huge, cathedral-like cavern was lighted by the flickering red glow from a dozen pine fagot torches thrust into crevices. It gleamed on the vast white pillars, and raced like flowing blood over the frostlike tapestries that draped the walls.

It glowed dully on the crouched, malignant figure of Quetzalcoatl, the vampire god.

A chanting, singsong sound filled the cavern, clattering like bursting bulbs among the pillars and giant chandeliers. The sound came from the throats of perhaps two score men who huddled cross-legged in a semi-circle about the golden idol, Quetzalcoatl. Their faces and bodies, naked from the waist up, were daubed and streaked with paint. They swayed slowly in rhythm with the chant.

These, Hatfield saw, were Indians, followers of Maxtla. The old tribe leader himself sat slightly to the fore of the others, his skeletal face distorted by some pagan passion, his skinny body swaying with a ghastly rhythm.

But it was the figures beyond those worshipers that riveted the attention of the two watchers.

The bald, snarling, paunchy figure of Quetzalcoatl crouched on its pedestal. In the sullen red glow from the torches the

thing was evil and lust incarnate. Its hooded eyes seemed to blaze with a fiery, gloating cruelty; its gross features seemed to writhe with silent, jeering laughter.

Its talonlike hands were outstretched with predatory eagerness toward the rude altar before it.

Going through a series of weird contortions before this altar was the giant figure of an Indian who, naked and painted like the others from the waist up, wore a hood-like affair over his head. This, obviously a wolfskin with the snarling head left on, also was hideously smeared with paint. Clutched in one hand as he writhed and chanted and gyrated, this hooded figure held a long-bladed knife.

Stretched on the altar, bound hand and foot, her eyes wide with terror, was Nan Coffee!

Jim Hatfield heard Raven's low, bitter curse of fury, heard a boot scrape against rock. He quickly placed a restraining hand on the young lawman's arm.

"Easy!" he cautioned, in a sibilant whisper. "They haven't hurt her yet. Let's hang and rattle a while till we see what happens."

Raven groaned with helpless anger, but sank back and gradually relaxed.

Jim Hatfield watched, eyes alert, every muscle in his mighty body as tense as steel cables. He wasn't thinking now of the treacherous Bourke Prine, nor of the fabulous treasure that might be inside that crouched, leering figure on the pedestal. All that mattered was the safety of the beautiful, terrified girl who cowered on the blood-stained altar before that monstrous figure.

This might have been a scene out of the Pit itself. The guttering torches cast weird shadows over the sacrificial cave, causing the paint streaks on the bodies of the swaying figures to writhe like snakes. The rhythmic chant was like the sound of a wind out of dark places, holding something wild and paganish and ancient. It fell to a low moan of anguish, then rose to a shrill cadence of utter triumph and ecstasy.

The chanting figures swayed back and forth, at times their foreheads touching the earth, their arms uplifted in frantic entreaty toward the hulking, wicked figure of Quetzalcoatl.

The gibberish that spewed from the gaping mouth of the hooded figure grew louder. His gyrations became faster and wilder as he leaped and whirled and danced.

The Lone Wolf watched, wary and grim-faced. He thought he knew what this meant. Maxtla and his followers thought that Quetzalcoatl was angry at something they had done, and they were pleading for his forgiveness.

Did they believe that the cause of the vampire god's anger was that the rancher Jim Coffee, had in some way discovered the hidden panel and come to this cave, thereby violating the presence of their sacred god? And did they hope to assauge Quetzalcoatl's wrath by delivering to him as sacrifice the daughter of the man who had committed that outrage?

He tensed with apprehension.

SUDDENLY the wolf-headed figure had stopped its mad gyrations. The medicine man stood a moment, poised like a cougar about to spring. The chanting gradually stopped, the swaying ceased, and the painted figures sat entirely motionless, an expression of unholy expectancy on their gargoylish faces.

Suddenly the hooded figure leaped, knife upraised, straight at the bound girl. Nan Coffee's horrified scream rang through the cavern.

Again Ben Raven snarled a furious curse, reared up from behind the boulders, gun in hand.

And again Jim Hatfield grasped his wrist, forcing the gun muzzle upward.

"Hold it, Raven!" he admonished. "That busky don't aim to kill her with that knife. I've seen these rituals before. He just aims to draw blood."

"Blast yuh, Hatfield, let go!" Raven said furiously, in a low voice. "You think I aim to roost here and watch the girl I love cut to ribbons?"

The Ranger held Raven in a viselike grip.

"Take my word for it, man—I'd side yuh till Hades turns into a skatin' pond if I thought she'd be harmed. He'll just draw a few drops of blood from her, not enough to hurt. Watch!"

Under the spell of Jim Hatfield's deep, calm voice the lawman quieted.

As Hatfield had predicted, the hooded

medicine man checked his deadly lunge just short of the white-faced girl. He stood over her, the knife poised motionless for a moment, the wolfskin hood a snarling mask.

"In these ceremonies," Hatfield whispered calmly, confidently, "they draw a few drops of blood from the victim's throat, then go away and don't come back for a long time. When they do return and find the sacrifice dead—starved, of course—they believe that Quetzalcoatl has drawn all the blood from its body and killed it. Steady, now!"

The hooded man bent slowly over the girl, the gleaming blade thrust before him. Nan Coffee screamed again, and tried frantically to squirm away. But she was bound securely to stakes at each end of the altar.

Then suddenly she became still, staring with wide, terror-filled eyes as the needle-sharp point of the knife crept closer and closer to her soft tanned throat.

A vast hush lay over the cavern now. Old Maxtla and his followers huddled utterly motionless, without sound, watching the scene before them as if the world's fate depended on its outcome.

Six inches from Nan's throat, the blade dropped suddenly. Nan flinched, but did not cry out. The hooded man jumped back.

A low moan was torn from Ben Raven's tight lips.

A murmur rose among Maxtla's followers.

Staining Nan Coffee's tanned throat was a tiny trickle of red!

The worshipers of Quetzalcoatl swayed forward a single time, their foreheads touching the floor. Then they got quickly to their feet, wheeled and stalked without order toward the cave's outlet.

They passed within feet of Hatfield and Raven, silent, staring straight ahead, and went on along the tunnel toward the secret doorway. Their footsteps gradually receded, and light from the single torch among them, carried by the hooded medicine man, grew dimmer and dimmer and finally vanished.

When the two hidden men were certain that the Indians had really departed, they leaped from behind the boulders and rushed across the cave toward the girl on the altar. Hatfield purposely held back, so that Ben Raven would be the first to reach her.

He heard Nan's glad cry of thanksgiving as she saw the tall young sheriff, saw the tears on Ben Raven's bronzed cheeks as he dropped to his knees and gathered the bound girl into his arms.

The tall Ranger paused, a sober, almost wistful light driving the icy sheen from his eyes as he watched the two, and through his mind, like a dark thread, ran the thought, "A Ranger rides a long trail and he rides alone."

Nan looked over Raven's shoulder and saw Hatfield.

"Ben, please—" she said.

"Don't yuh reckon we'd better cut the lady loose?" Hatfield grinned, and drew a long-bladed knife from his pocket.

THE next moment he was assisting Nan to her feet. With a shudder she turned her eyes away from the crouched, leering figure of Quetzalcoatl in whose shadow she had lain. With a bandanna Raven wiped the thin stain of blood from her throat.

"It didn't hurt," she declared. "I didn't even feel it. But I—I thought I was as good as dead."

"Hatfield, I owe yuh one," Raven declared feelingly. "If yuh hadn't stopped me I'd have done somethin' that'd got us all a ticket to boot hill."

"Forget it," Hatfield said quietly. "As I told yuh, I'd seen almost the same ceremony down in Mexico and knew what to expect. Otherwise I'd been smokin' it up with yuh."

"That awful thing!" Nan was looking again at the bloated idol on the pedestal. "Is it really the vampire god, Quetzalcoatl?"

The Lone Wolf nodded.

"It's a golden image of Quetzalcoatl. With many heathen tribes over the world, human victims are brought before the image of their particular god and killed as an offering of appeasement or to gain favor in the eyes of the god. With the Aztecs and Quetzalcoatl it is a little different, but no less deadly. For centuries the ritual has been almost exactly as it was carried out here a few moments ago.

"Blood is drawn from the victim's throat. Then the Indians leave, supposedly so the vampire god can gorge

himself in privacy on the victim's blood. When they return, days later, the victim has naturally starved to death. It's their belief that the god has taken all the sacrifice's blood. As with these torches, a light is always left burning in the sacrificial chamber to furnish light for Quetzalcoatl's feast."

Nan shivered again, and Raven placed a big arm about her.

"The thing's supposed to be hollow," Hatfield went on, and stepped without reverence across the altar and onto the edge of the rock pedestal where the idol crouched.

As Raven and the girl watched, the Ranger ran his hands lightly over the thing. Along its columnar legs, over its protruding stomach, through the splayed, clawlike fingers. Pressing, feeling, tugging. The metallic thing was cold and smooth to his touch.

Although the thing was the size of two ordinary men, in its crouched position its leering features were on a level with Hatfield's own. The Ranger's fingers shifted to that evil, predatory face. He ran his hands over the bald, bulbous skull, pressed on the bulging eyeballs, twisted on the beaklike nose.

There was a grating sound, and Nan exclaimed, "Look!"

A foot-square panel had slid open in the center of the idol's broad chest!

There was no excitement on Hatfield's face or in his voice as he said:

"Hand me up a torch, Ben."

CHAPTER XIX

Blood for the Vampire

UNEASILY Raven lifted one of the burning fagots and handed it to Hatfield. The Ranger held it close to the opening in the idol's chest and looked inside. He reached a long arm down inside the thing, and they heard a jangling sound. Then he withdrew his arm and stepped down to the altar.

He grinned, said to Nan Coffee, "Want to look?" and took hold of her arm and helped her up onto the pedestal.

He held the torch up so that its light sifted through the opening. Nan drew in her breath sharply. She looked a long moment, like a woman looking at something very beautiful, then stepped down. Ben Raven had a longer look, putting a hand down inside the idol as Hatfield had done and fondling its contents.

"Jumpin' blue blazes!" he mumbled, as he stepped down. "So it wasn't a pack of lies. Gold and silver bars!"

"And jewels!" Nan murmured. "They glow like fire in the light."

"Aztec jewels." Hatfield nodded. "Precious stones. One piece of the stuff would be worth a small fortune in New York, London or Paris. The jewels of Quetzalcoatl?"

"And they're mine, Hatfield!" a voice cried out triumphantly. "Throw down your guns, both of you, if you want to live!"

Hatfield whirled toward the cave entrance.

Men were streaming from the tunnel, guns in hand. At their head was Bourke Prine, followed closely by the waddling, scuttling figure of Judge Clagg. Behind these two crowded Lash Burma, Nick Sabot and a dozen other shadowy figures.

"Lay down your guns," Prine called again. "You're cornered and don't have a chance!"

"Take 'em if yuh want 'em, yuh treacherous swine!" the Lone Wolf cried in stentorian tones.

He leaped backward, his mighty arms sweeping with him Nan Coffee and Ben Raven who were trying desperately to gain the shelter of the vampire god, Quetzalcoatl, before screaming lead cut them down.

His drive carried both Nan and Raven down with him, and as they fell they heard the snarl of lead in the spot where they had stood a second before. The crashing sound of gunfire filled the cavern.

They hit the hard earth with stunning, bruising force. But the Ranger's quick action had momentarily saved their lives. They were behind the crouched idol and the broad pedestal on which it crouched.

Hatfield and Raven snaked out their guns. Hatfield pushed the girl down flat on the earth close up against the pedestal.

"Get them, you fools—kill them!" Prine was yelling.

Hatfield snaked his long-barreled Colts over the edge of the pedestal and their snarling thunder slammed over the cavern. One of the outlaws yelled, fell sideward to the earth, then scuttled like an immense spider for the shelter of the boulders at the cave entrance.

Others sought the same shelter from the Ranger's bullets, while the remainder dived behind other boulders and jutting slabs of rock lining the cavern wall. Prine kept yelling at them, from some place of safety, cursing them, urging them to attack.

"They need a leader, Prine!" Hatfield called tauntingly. "They'll come and get us if yuh'll lead 'em. Come on out! What's wrong? Yella?"

He wanted to force a showdown quickly, for a long battle would increase the desperate odds against them. If he could goad the leaders—Prine, Burma, Sabot—into a charge, his guns could cut them down. The others were only pawns and would have no stomach for a wipe-out fight.

But it was the pompous, drunken voice of Judge Clagg that answered him.

"You are arrayed against hopeless odds, my good man. Your only hope for survival is surrender. Remember your chivalry, think of the lady. I myself, an officer of the Confederacy, will see to it —"

The Judge broke off with a startled squawk as Hatfield's lead screamed and hammered at the boulder behind which he huddled.

The cavern seemed to explode in a red holocaust of gunfire and howling lead, as the barricaded outlaws blasted wildly at the spot where Hatfield and his friends crouched. They flattened themselves against the cave floor, hearing the wicked hiss of the bullets as they caromed off the pedestal and the figure of Quetzalcoatl. Fragments of stone showered over them.

GRIM-EYED, Jim Hatfield tried to gauge their chances—and saw none at all. At least a dozen and a half men were arrayed against them. To such a fight there could be but one ending.

Quetzalcoatl, after all, would have his victims, his blood!

The gunfire had slackened, but Prine was still cursing, still goading his men.

"You cowardly swine! There it is—that's what we've been looking for so long! See that idol? It's pure gold! See that hole in its chest. The cursed thing's hollow, and it's filled with gold and jewels, yours for the taking!"

"I don't care about them things!" That was Nick Sabot's growling voice somewhere in the shadows. "I want Hatfield! I want to pay him for what he done to me."

"Millions!" Prine's voice wasn't sauve and smooth now, but harsh with greed and rage. "There it is—millions, you fools!"

"Talkin' won't get it for yuh, Prine!" the Lone Wolf jeered. "Yuh'll have to get us first. I'll meet yuh halfway!"

Prine gave no sign of hearing him. He kept lashing at his followers with curses and taunts.

Scattered gunfire kept drumming from among the boulders and rock slabs. But there was a murmuring among the owl-hoots, too, under the lash of Prine's tongue, a growling and stirring. A bottle was passed from hand to hand until it was emptied, then another started the rounds.

Hatfield crouched, holding his fire, knowing that the gunmen were fortifying themselves for a smashing, overwhelming charge. He looked at Raven and Nan Coffee. Raven's face was pale, grim, but without fear except for the girl. He huddled with one arm about her. Hatfield couldn't see her face.

He thought with a dismal misery of the posse he had told the punchers in Perdida to recruit. How much time had elapsed since their arrival here? It seemed like ages, but he knew that in reality it had been less than half an hour.

It would take time to gather a big posse. Then possibly the cowhands would pause long enough to get a few drinks inside them. And they wouldn't cover the ground between town and the ruins near so quickly as had Hatfield and Raven.

Dismally the Ranger shook his head again. They hadn't had time, not near. And they wouldn't have time.

The stirrings were louder among the rocks lining the cavern walls now. The murmuring among the killers had risen to taunts and yells flung jeeringly across

the cave at those behind the pedestal. The fagots flickered and guttered, casting a reddish pall like fresh blood over everything.

"There's only two of them!" Prine was crying. "Two men—between you and half the gold in Texas!"

The torches flickered, and shadows washed like muddy water over the cruel, evil face of Quetzalcoatl.

"Say yore prayers, Ranger!" a harsh voice called. "Yuh're about to get a one-way ticket to perdition!"

"Mebbe I am!" The Lone Wolf's calm voice was bell-clear. "But others'll come after yuh. Ranger law won't ever die in Texas!"

Guffaws answered him, and Prine's whiplash voice goaded them.

"Now—now! Gold! And I'll lead you to it. Now!"

Almost a score of men surged up from behind the boulders, like a black wave of death, the torchlight shining on their drawn guns and their wolf-eager faces. Flame leaped out from gun-muzzles.

Jim Hatfield's guns leaped and blazed as he fired deliberately. Sheriff Ben Raven crouched shoulder-to-shoulder with him. They saw a man go down, another. Bourke Prine's screaming voice goaded the others on.

But halfway across the cavern that yelling, shooting wave of death faltered, broke, halted. For a lithe form, its naked body painted from the waist up, had leaped from the tunnel into the cavern, followed by another, and another. Shrill yells rang out from these figures, and shots. And other forms crowded in.

BOURKE PRINE had not led the charge of the outlaws as he had promised, but now, in the face of this new menace, he came plunging out of the boulders. His face was twisted into a satanic mask of baffled fury. Judge Clagg followed him closely, scuttling like an enormously fat rat, squeaking with terror.

"It's the Injuns!" Lash Burma bawled. "Fight yore way out of here or they'll massacre us to the last man!"

The outlaws whirled back toward the cave outlet.

But Maxtla's yelling, enraged horde met them head-on. They came together in a confused mêlée of gunfire and slashing knives. Roar and fury of savage, no-quarter battle filled the cavern.

Jim Hatfield and Raven leaped out from behind their barricade. Raven locked with a burly, bearded outlaw.

Judge Clagg had been caught between those opposing forces as they joined battle. Squalling his terror, he had gone down under trampling feet and was now lost to sight.

Nick Sabot, his animal mind riveted on one set purpose, had not turned back with the others. As Hatfield rose from behind the idol, the dark giant drove at him, his broad, battered face asnarl with hate, a long-bladed knife in his hand.

Seeing Sabot almost too late, Hatfield writhed away, crashing with terrific force against the idol. He felt the knife blade slash through his shirt front, heard Sabot grunt with vicious triumph, smelled the unclean scent of the man in his nostrils.

With the cavern reeling before his eyes, Hatfield rolled away, clubbing at Sabot with his gun-barrel. Sabot stumbled backward, but braced himself on treelike legs, staring with his hooded eyes at the Ranger and saying something that Hatfield could not make out above the roar of battle.

From the corner of his eye, Hatfield saw another man break away from the knot of fighting, swearing men, and drive at him. It was Bourke Prine, and Prine had a gun in his hand. The Ranger had a second of indecision, with peril on his right and peril in front of him. Which should it be?

CHAPTER XX

Ranger Law Underground

MOMENTS seemed interminable, with the death battle between Maxtla's followers and the outlaws unreeling before Jim Hatfield's eyes. Knives flashed and guns roared, and smoke fogged thick. The cave floor seemed littered with men.

Then the Ranger's decision was made as Sabot leaped, like an enraged grizzly, knife upraised.

And Hatfield shot him, and shot him

again, and dodged away as the giant charged headlong into the crouched idol, Quetzalcoatl. Nick Sabot rolled away from that leering figure, crashed to the cave floor and lay still, the evil and bestial lust for blood in him quenched by death.

Prine's first bullet burned the Ranger's cheek, the second scorched a groove across his ribs. Even then, if Prine had been satisfied to stop his wild charge, to steady himself and fire again, he might have killed the Lone Wolf. But rage, the wildness of seeing a fortune he had thought was his slipping from his grasp, slammed him forward with clubbed gun.

Hatfield twisted away from that savage blow. As Prine surged past him, the Ranger reached out huge hands, seized the crooked prosecuting attorney by the belt and collar. His great muscles bunched, he lifted the squirming Prine high above his head, and threw him from him violently.

Prine landed almost in a sitting position on the flat stone beside the yawning hole in the cavern floor. The stone tilted, sharply and quickly, as it had with Hatfield that morning.

Prine screamed, showing Hatfield a white face stained by terror, as he slid along the stone toward the yawning pit. Fingers and boots clawed frantically at the smooth surface.

Hatfield leaped forward. But he was too late. Bourke Prine slid over the edge and plummeted downward, into the blackness and cold and death that lay below. For Prine, even if he were not killed in the fall, would never have the courage or strength to accomplish what Hatfield had accomplished.

Hatfield jerked his gaze away from the pit. The battle still raged full fury, although it had taken a deadly toll. The outlaws had put up a desperate fight. A score of Indians were on the cave floor.

Prine, Judge Clagg, Sabot, Lash Burma—all were dead, along with half a dozen other renegades.

Old Maxtla stood nearby, outside the circle of fighting men, his wrinkle-embedded eyes alight with a fanatic flame.

Hatfield took from a concealed pocket his Ranger badge—the silver star against a silver shield—and pinned it on his shirt. Then he stepped over to Maxtla. The ancient Indian stood his ground, watching the tall Ranger warily.

"Maxtla," Hatfield said curtly, "when I give the signal, call to yore men to stop fightin'."

Maxtla shook his head doggedly.

"The white devils must all die. By violating the temple of our sacred god they bring this fate upon themselves. Maxtla has spoken, Tall One!"

"Then Maxtla will speak ag'in!" The Lone Wolf's voice was flat, deadly calm. He drew both guns. "Do like I say, or I'll start shootin' into yore men and all will die. Savvy?"

Maxtla said nothing, but the flame dimmed in his old eyes. He knew that the big Ranger was not bluffing.

Hatfield's stentorian voice rang like a trumpet above the crash of battle:

"All right, you buskies, break it up! The fight's over!"

Instantly, Maxtla cried out in his own tongue.

The words had a magic effect. White men and red broke apart and the fighting stopped almost instantly. They stood exhausted, disheveled, battered and bloody.

Raven jumped over and stood beside Hatfield, gun in hand.

"In the name of Texas, I arrest all of you!" Hatfield said coldly. "Lay down yore guns!"

The few remaining outlaws hesitated, looking from the towering, stern-faced Ranger to their own dead. All the fight went out of them, and their weapons thudded to the earth. Sheriff Raven herded the cowed owlhoots to one side.

"Maxtla," ordered the Ranger, "tell yore men to drop whatever they're holdin!"

"My men are guilty of no wrong-doing," Maxtla said stubbornly. "They were but protecting what belonged to them. They fought because the white devils had violated the sacred presence of their god. Is there wickedness in that, or does it break the white man's law?"

HATFIELD shook his head, and shrugged.

"Mebbe not," he admitted grimly. He pointed to Nan Coffee, who stood beside Raven. "This girl was kidnaped and brought here against her will."

"It is so, Tall One." Maxtla bowed

his ancient head. "It is a law of our race that cannot be broken. If the great Quetzalcoatl becomes angry, he who has incurred that wrath must be brought forward and offered as sacrifice so that the god's vengeance may be lifted from our people. Or, if that man is dead, his nearest of kin. It is the law."

"No harm came to her, so that can slide for the time bein'," said Hatfield. "But two Circle Three punchers were killed when she was taken, and that's a crime in any man's language!"

Again Maxtla bowed his head, and his body seemed to shrink even smaller.

"That, too, is so, and I am sorry," he murmured. "I ordered that there was to be no bloodshed. But those who went for the girl were young and hot-blooded. They hated the whites, and perhaps there was evil in their hearts. They disobeyed my orders, and killed."

"Where are they?" the Ranger demanded.

Old Maxtla's sorrowful gaze traveled slowly over the still figures on the floor, and returned to Hatfield.

"They are dead," he said simply. "All of them."

Jim Hatfield's eyes narrowed with thought. He had no way of knowing whether the old Indian told the truth or not.

"It's not for me to decide whether yuh're innocent or guilty," he said slowly. "Somebody else will decide that. My duty is to take yuh where it can be decided."

"But our beloved god, the precious things he holds inside his sacred body!" There was entreaty in the old Indian's words and tone. "Surely these things do not belong to the white man to desecrate and destroy!"

"They shore don't!" the Lone Wolf said promptly. "That's one thing I think I can promise yuh. That ugly jigger there, and everything in it, will be sent back where it came from, turned over to the descendants of the people it was stolen from a hundred years ago. Texas will be cussed glad to get rid of it! Texas thieves stole it, and honest men of Texas will give it back."

"The Tall One is a great and good man. I believe him!"

"Then tell yore men to drop their weapons!"

Maxtla spoke a single word, and the Indians instantly let whatever weapons they held fall to the earth.

Hatfield glanced at Ben Raven and Nan Coffee. They stood close, smiling at each other as if they were seeing into a future that was bright and golden as the hair of the girl the young sheriff held in his arms.

The Ranger's gaze shifted. The vampire god, Quetzalcoatl, still crouched there on his pedestal, still smiled his cruel smile as he stared with wicked, greedy eyes over the cavern. Was he, Hatfield wondered grimly, lusting for the fresh, bright red blood that ran in tiny rivulets over the cavern floor?

* * * * *

"And that's how it happened," Jim Hatfield said, a week later, as he sprawled in a chair in Captain Bill McDowell's office in Austin. "If old Quetzalcoatl likes blood, he saw plenty of it! What yuh reckon'll happen to Maxtla and his bucks?"

The crusty old Ranger Captain puffed vigorously on his pipe until the office fogged like a clogged furnace.

"Yore guess is as good as mine," he finally said. "A lot'll depend on yore recommendation, of course, and I'll bet a plugged peso I know what that'll be."

"I kind of cottoned to the old crow, even if he was stubborn and cranky as a jackass," Hatfield said, and grinned.

"Way I figgered it. I wouldn't want to bet the whole kit and caboodle wouldn't see Lake Tezcuco, along with their heathen idol. After all, I figger they wasn't too far wrong accordin' to their lights."

The Lone Wolf nodded soberly.

"Every man, good or bad, white or red or black, must live his life the way he sees and feels it . . . What yuh keep fiddlin' with that paper for?"

McDOWELL scowled and lifted an envelope from the desk.

"Letter from a gent up in the Panhandle."

"Trouble?"

"Ain't there always trouble in Texas?" snapped the old Ranger. "If it ain't in the Panhandle, it's down on the Gulf. Or over in the Big Thickets, or the Staked

Plains, or along the Nueces or the Red. Trouble and gunsmoke foggin' over Texas—and me tied to this gol-rammed, dog-blanked desk! I been kind of holdin' off on this till you got back, Jim. Looks like a plumb tough case."

"Soon be pretty cold up in the Panhandle, won't it?"

"Cold?" growled the old Ranger. "Not for long, it won't, after a certain long-rigged Ranger galoot gets up there and cuts loose his wolf! Yuh want the job, or not?"

"Reckon I do," Hatfield drawled, and again grinned lazily as he uncurled his six-foot-four length from the chair. "Be ready to ride soon as I get me a couple hours' sleep."

"Couple hours, my old granny!" Bill McDowell bellowed after the towering Ranger as he went through the doorway. "You goin' soft on me? Yuh got just thirty minutes to hit leather! Never knowed a Ranger to need more!"

Then McDowell leaned back in his chair, placed his boots on the scarred desk and grinned comfortably into the fogging smoke.

"Yonder goes a *man!*" he told himself. "Long as Texas has got gents like the Lone Wolf lookin' after her she's got no call to fret!"

"On to Rogetville!"

THAT'S where Jim Hatfield heads in next month's stirring novel—and you'll ride along with him as he encounters some of the most exciting adventures of his career! Rogetville—a town named after General Ambrose T. Roget, whose chief distinction is that he commands as ruthless a crew of killers and range criminals as can be found!

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The stallion Eclipse submits to capture, but keeps the hope of freedom alive in his heart!

HARD-PRESSED and weary from an all-night run, Eclipse, the elusive wild stallion, led what was left of his once-large bunch into the dark recesses of a rock-walled box canyon high above the basin.

For a moment, the great sorrel was silhouetted against the early-morning light as he paused on a rise of ground to look back at that single file of riders pursuing him and his band of five mares and four spindly-legged colts up from the lowlands where the grass grew green and the cattle wintered.

He sniffed the wind with flared nostrils and his noble head came up high, with ears pointed toward the human things on those stout-bodied range ponies.

Of all creatures that lived or breathed,

he feared most those men who hounded the foothills on the trail of his vanishing wild herd. For sight or scent of them always brought to him a chilled dread of thundering guns and shouting men, who reaped a bounty on each slain wild broomtail from wealthy ranchers who ran blooded stock in the basin.

Now the scent was strong and he could see the approaching enemy. He pawed the ground, turned and looked at his small bunch with the calculated wisdom that had enabled him to elude the wild horse hunters up to now.

His was a pitiful wild bunch. Some of those that had vanished had perished in the cold of mountain blizzards where they had been driven by the ruthless men living in the lowlands. Others had fallen to the gray wolf packs, or died under the fangs of stalking cougars. But men with thundering guns remained the most feared enemies on the badlands range.

He nipped at a mare, snorted viciously. That pitiful band of five tired mares and four long-legged spring colts galloped up a game trail into the canyon that nature had carpeted with a tangle of trees and evergreen vegetation, supplying it with gushing springs of clear fresh water to make the place a natural paradise for all wild creatures.

Eclipse had been so named by cattlemen of badlands range because of his ability to vanish into nothingness with his wild horse herd. He suddenly whistled shrilly and reared on hind legs, threshing the air with flinty hoofs.

For a moment, mares and their foals stopped in the trail, chilled by the warning. They swerved obediently, without passing under a tree that some great storm of the past had uprooted and flung like a living arch across the canyon floor beside a swiftly flowing stream that swirled on toward the outer regions to the basin below.

The fallen tree had long ago shot new roots into the flinty ground. There at the butt of the tree, Eclipse shied away from the bleached-bone remains of hapless wild creatures that had gone down under the murderous fangs and claws of mountain cougars that had pounced on them from the denseness of foliage on the arched tree trunk.

The stallion snorted a warning at a disobedient colt that cut from the bunch and headed straight toward the deadfall nature had left in the wilderness. The colt went on, tail swishing, toward the arch, keeping straight ahead on the game trail.

ECLIPSE could not scent the mountain lion that pressed close to the tree like a knot of burl against the trunk. For the morning was cold in the canyon, with warmer air pressing in from the outside, bearing the wind-laden odors of the wilderness. He knew the killer lurked there, waiting patiently for some unsuspecting animal to walk along the trail beneath the arch, for he saw the slow swishing of a snake-like tail, and dim light glistened for a moment on a pair of vicious yellow eyes.

Up there, the creature moved. A weird scream sounded and lips snarled from bared fangs. With the speed of striking lightning, the cougar sprang. In mid-air, his long body was outlined in the dim light that filtered through the overhead roof of evergreens.

The colt squealed with panic when that yellow streak of unleashed death struck him. The cougar growled viciously. Savage claws ripped and slashed. The colt's spindly legs buckled. Blood, hot and strong, splashed the green ferns and crimsoned the canyon floor. The dying colt sprawled there with a broken neck, his long legs kicking.

For a moment, the big cougar crouched over his kill, yellow eyes ablaze. He slapped at a mare that came too close. The mare shied off, whinnying piteously over the loss of her foal. A streak of crimson appeared on her velvety flank where the big cat's claws had raked to the bone.

Now, like the unleashed thunder of a mountain storm, Eclipse charged the yellow cat that had felled the colt. The cougar turned, and leaped nimbly aside, avoiding the stallion's murderous hoofs. He was gone in a flash, the yellow of his body blending with the green of the wilderness wall.

The furious sorrel stallion pranced beside the dead colt. He whistled shrilly, lashed out with front feet at the underbrush into which the cougar had vanished. For a moment, he stood pawing

the ground, his eyes filled with fire, his nostrils extended.

Then, the scent of those oncoming horse hunters came strong to his nostrils, blowing into the canyon on a vagrant breeze. His five mares and three remaining colts stood bunched near the creek, waiting, with the fear of the unknown causing them to tremble. Faithfully, they looked to Eclipse to lead them from shadow of impending danger.

The bold monarch stood in the game trail, head high, ears perked forward. He listened to sound of those oncoming horsemen. On the wind, he got their scent, closer, more powerful. His nostrils flared and his eyes blazed with fury and defiance. Suddenly, he wheeled and headed deeper into the darkness of the gloomy canyon. Hoofbeats rang on flinty ground.

Behind him, he heard the shouting of those man things. They were fanning out and closing in on the last of the wild horse herd.

Eclipse raced into the canyon, followed by mares and colts. Beyond the eastern peaks the rising sun sent crimson rays heavenward, reaching out for valleys and mountains beyond. Ahead of the racing stallion, a frightened rabbit scurried for cover, his white tail bobbing like a cotton ball. Suddenly, a solid rock wall terminated the canyon, and the stream along which the horses had raced poured from the crevices high up on the cliff itself, tumbled down in a cataract of splendor to the creek below.

The wild stallion reared high, came down pawing ground near the rock wall where the canyon ended. He ran back and forth along the cliff, searching for a trail up those steep walls to the rim above. He found no trail.

His mares and foals huddled in a tight bunch beside the stream. Threshing through undergrowth on their horses, the man things came on toward that trapped wild bunch. Their shouting voices rose, triumphant, in the early-morning stillness, sending wild terror through Eclipse. He snorted and pawed in his desperation, as though he sensed that he and his charges were trapped by those relentless pursuers.

He lunged at the sloping wall, found footing and pawed his way to a rock ledge ten feet above the canyon floor. Beyond that point the cliff was perpendicular, unscalable. But the height gave Eclipse a point of observation. For a moment, he stood on the shelf like a statue in bronze, facing the first lazy rays of the sun that slanted into the canyon.

He saw that the hunters were strung out along the east bank of the stream, moving on toward him and his charges with all speed possible. A dense belt of green stuff edged the stream on the west bank, and beyond that he could see the jagged boulders that studded the canyon floor. Right now, men were putting their mounts into the creek to shut off the wild horse herd from that last retreat.

WITH the wisdom and decisive action of a human being, the great stallion saw his chance and took it. Down there somewhere a rifle cracked. Something smashed against the black rock cliff behind him, that bullet letting the stallion know the men had seen him.

He snorted his indignation, bounded off the ledge in a graceful leap that took him safely down to the canyon floor beside the stream. He whistled at his herd and plunged into that swift, cold water, nipping at mares and foals that hesitated swimming.

Water splashed down his sleek sides, cold and numbing, but he kept the mares ahead of him and nosed the faltering colts along helpfully.

One weak-bodied foal gave out in midstream, went rolling in a barrel-like manner down the swirling rapids. The rest of the wild bunch made shore safely, and the mother of that lost colt started downstream along the bank, searching for her offspring. Eclipse kicked at her with both hind feet, drove her ruthlessly back with those other broomtails.

He fought the mares along a rock-studded trail toward the west wall of the canyon, hearing the thunder of shod hoofs beyond the stream. Men shouted when they found their quarry vanished. Guns spoke back there along the stream, but the wild herd pounded on toward the safety they might find outside the canyon.

Eclipse paused on a rise of ground on the mountain slope to take observation.

He saw that relentless string of horsemen pounding leather on his backtrail. Leg-weary and hungry, he and his small band of hapless broomtails thundered up the slope and skylined across the ridge, went racing downward toward the badlands of the desert beyond the hills.

All that day, they were driven without letup. Whenever Eclipse looked back, always he saw the thin dust cloud that told of the presence of his enemies.

Twice when he tried to turn his bunch back toward the mountains, man creatures appeared on the skyline, herded the wild bunch on back to the hot sands of the desert. The sun rode across a cloudless sky, bearing down on that scorched corner of Hades with a vengeance.

Out there on that blistered corner of hell, Eclipse sensed that he had been driven into a man-made trap. For when he approached a waterhole that all wild desert creatures used, he saw the forms of cowboys blended with the green of the desert shrubbery near the water. The thunder of guns frightened him into a quick retreat. Instinct warned him that men would be guarding all other watering places.

Tired, thirsty and hungry, the weary band fled on across the blistering sands. When the night came down, they were given no rest. Horsemen in fresh relays answered to the call of the hunter's horn, relieving those who had worn down their mounts.

Two colts were gone, one to a cougar, the other had drowned. Now moonlight flooded the cooling desert sands, and Eclipse saw a mare back there in the distance, head drooped with utter weariness, as she stood beside her fallen foal. The hand of the desert had sapped their strength. They would perish back there.

Eclipse heard the relentless horse hunters on the backtrail. He saw that string of ghostly riders coming on and on. Desperation lent him strength to force the mares on into the desolate land of death. They went on without him, fleeing fast.

The last of the colts faltered in stride, wobbled back to stand beside Eclipse, who faced the sound of oncoming horsemen. He felt something nudge him, and looked to see the colt, hungry and tired. The little fellow nudged him again with his dust-streaked nose, but there was no food for a famished foal. Eclipse muzzled the little animal with gentle affection, then sent him on the trail of those vanishing mares.

He galloped back toward those oncoming horsemen, his flinty hoofs plodding through sand and over hardpan ground. He was within a hundred feet of the horse hunters before those man creatures saw him. He swerved off sharply, took flight in a direction opposite from that taken by the mares. His trick fooled those seasoned punchers, for they gave chase.

Eclipse tried for the foothills and might have made them safely, but a crew of punchers loitering on the backtrail heard the signals tooted on that hunter's horn and knew that the chase was coming in their general direction. They closed in fast, catching the great tired stallion between two groups. Lariats whistled through the air. One of those long, snaky ropes settled around the stallion's neck, choking him down.

HE FOUGHT with his last remaining strength, but strong hands walked up that taut rope. They hobbled him, binding his front legs so close together with pigging strings that he spilled himself every time he tried to go galloping off into the night.

"Ain't he a beaut!" a man creature declared. "Worth all the trouble we've put in catchin' him. Looks to me like this'll end in a sudden *Eclipse* for the best danged stallion that ever stole a mare off'n a blooded hoss ranch. Ole man Brewston will give a thousand dollars for that hoss' hide. And I aim to split the money with every man who's helped on the chase. But, dang my hide, I refuse to be the one who kills such a stallion."

"I reckon you're right, Bill," another man said. "I wouldn't be a murderer like that for no man's dirty money. But ole man Brewston won't have no scruples again' puttin' lead in a hoss that's stolen some of his best brood mares. So, I reckon we'll take Eclipse in and let Brewston do the job."

They pulled up at a waterhole and let Eclipse drink. For a while, they rested at a camp in the foothills, not far from that dead-end canyon where the last of the wild bunch had been trapped.

Eclipse munched grain and hay from the supply wagon. He felt his strength returning. He shied back from the fire around which those man things hunkered, his eyes wild with the fear of those crimson shadows that cut through darkness. Beyond, in a rope corral, he heard saddle horses milling uneasily. Then, on the wind, he got the scent of a cougar.

There were mares there in that rope corral, fattened on grain and hay and green grass of the basin. One swipe of a big cat's paw could break a mare's neck. Eclipse pawed the ground, sorely troubled.

He felt the hobbles on his forelegs, walked slowly to the end of the picket rope and lunged against it, feeling it choke him. He whistled a warning to those milling mares. One of them whinnied softly through darkness. Somehow the big stallion's closeness had banished much of her fear.

Eclipse had lost his mares and all of their foals. The masculine urge within him soared high, mingled with a lonesomeness and a protective instinct toward all his kind. He lunged against the picket rope and heard it snap.

A tawny shadow slipped along the ground, belly low, tail swishing, toward those roped-in mares there in the darkness. Eclipse, that day, had lost a foal to a mountain cougar. His nostrils flared, his eyes flashed lightning. Just as that slinking beast rose in his leap toward an unsuspecting mare's back, the great stallion charged, going up on hind legs, forefeet pawing. Those flint-hard hoofs caught the cougar in mid-air, slapping him down with a crashing thud.

Eclipse knew that all cougars were cowards when beaten quickly. Before the downed cat could spring away into the shadows, the stallion's hoofs battered him back to the ground.

The mountain lion's vicious snarls sounded loud and menacing. The mares broke down that frail rope corral, went plunging out into the night. The cougar slashed with unsheathed claws at the monstrous demon trampling him. Those claws tangled with the pigging string that hobbled Eclipse, slashing through the bonds like a sharp-edged knife.

Now, with both forefeet free, Eclipse came down hard on that threshing mass of fangs and claws. A commotion at the campfire caught his attention.

"What's goin' on out at the corral!" a man bellowed.

Man creatures came running, shouting to one another, frantic and desperate.

Eclipse felt those sharp claws slash a crimson streak to the bone of his left foreleg. He gave that writhing, clawing thing a last bombardment of flinty hoofs, then turned toward the mares that he could see silhouetted against the darker outline of a rocky butte beyond the camp.

The horses had paused there, uncertain and bewildered. Eclipse galloped up to them, began kicking and snorting. Those range-bred mares seemed to know when they'd met their master. Obediently, they turned toward the foothill country, to become mountain broomtails on the badlands range.

"He's a-leavin' us afoot!" a man shouted back there at the camp. "That ol' stallion is a-stealin' our mares!"

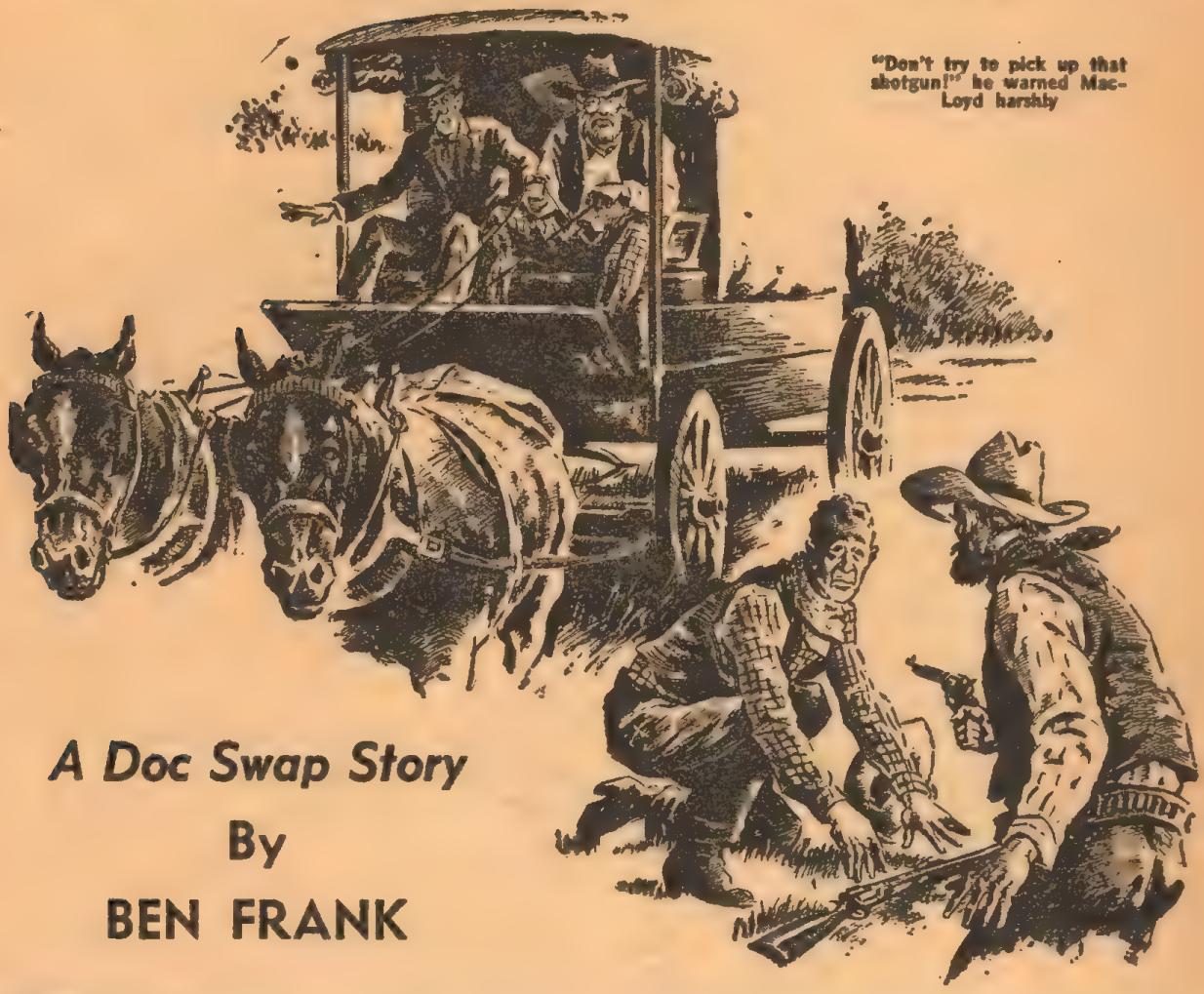
ECLIPSE paused on a rise of ground, looked longingly out toward the desert fastness. If they survived, those lost mares and that remaining wild foal would come back to him and find him waiting somewhere on the wild horse range. He whistled sharply, gathering up his herd, and turned to go jogging easily up the mountain slope.

Back at the camp, the blare of a hunting horn sounded weirdly, but that horn wasn't signaling for men to take up the chase. For the chase was over. That hunter's horn sounded a cowboy's prayer that somebody might hear it and bring saddle horses, fresh mounts for the foot-weary pilgrims who had lost their own. Eclipse didn't know what the signal meant, but he turned his head toward the sound and saw several of those pilgrims plodding home, without awaiting an answer to that cowboy's prayer.

The stallion reared high, came down pawing. He kicked at a mare, drove her into the herd and headed the bunch into the fastness of the hill country.

He felt the vigor of a reborn strength, and in his wild, untrammeled heart was a sense of greatness and power, and a freedom, mingled with the wisdom that would protect him and his wild bunch on the wilderness range.

The Well Digger



"Don't try to pick up that shotgun!" he warned MacLoyd harshly

A Doc Swap Story

By

BEN FRANK

THE two empty water pails clutched in his fat fingers, old Doc Swap came puffing up to his neat white cottage. Dropping the pails on the front porch, he reckoned he ought to have a well dug near the barn. Lugging water from the house to his bay team, two cows and one pig—all trading stock except the team—was a downright nuisance.

Frowning, he whipped off his fancy pearl-gray Stetson—he'd swapped a wind-broken old horse for the hat and considered this deal one of the highlights of his career—and scratched his pink bald head. Some way, he thought, he ought to be able to swap around for a well. Still frowning, he gazed toward town.

"Sheriff MacLoyd!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Get that ole buzzard in a swap, and as like as not I can get a well dug free!"

Grinning maliciously behind his ragged white whiskers, he hitched his pants up over his over-sized middle and headed for the heart of the little cow-town of Dry Bluffs and the sun-warped Bluff County jail. He noticed vaguely that

When the tradin' hombre gets his eye on Sheriff MacLoyd's hunting dog, there's just no way to halt the inevitable!

Jeff Weber was painting a new sign on the front of his general store, but didn't give it a second thought.

Eyes bright, he crossed the courthouse square, mounted the three jail steps and waddled into the sheriff's two-by-four office. For forty years, Doc Swap and Sheriff MacLoyd, no holds barred, had been in one trade after another, each trying to swindle the other.

The sheriff's swivel chair stood empty. Doc gazed about the dusty office, looking for an inspiration. None came.

He wandered to the battered oak desk and jerked open a drawer. MacLoyd was not a neat housekeeper. In that drawer was everything from ratty plugs of eating tobacco to handcuffs. Snorting in disgust, Doc slammed the drawer shut.

"Ain't a less neat ole goat in the world!" he said.

"What's that?" a voice roared from the doorway, and Doc lifted startled eyes to Sheriff MacLoyd's thin, angry face.

Doc blinked unhappily. This indeed was a bad start in getting the sheriff, his rival in the two occupations dearest to his heart, fiddle playing and swapping, into a dicker.

"I was just sayin'—" he began faintly.

"Yeah, I heard yuh," MacLoyd said grittily. "And I also seen yuh snoopin' in that drawer. Of all the nosey ole scalawags, you are the worst! Kindly remove yoreself before—"

SOMETHING had trailed the sheriff into the office. It was a dog. Red and sleek. A fine head and silky ears. As fancy a looking bird dog as Doc had ever seen.

Ignoring MacLoyd's outburst, Doc asked, "Whose is that?"

MacLoyd's thin lips puckered, and he bombarded the battered brass spittoon with a sizzling stream of tobacco juice.

"That," he said coldly, "is my new bird dog, Red Boy. An'," he added pointedly, "he is smart enough not to snoop around."

"A right handsome dog," Doc said diplomatically. "In fact, I don't know when I've seen a dog I like better."

Dark suspicion filled the sheriff's pale eyes. So seldom did Doc praise anything he owned that now he reckoned there must be a dead rat in the woodpile some place.

"Looky," he said, "there ain't nobody who likes to hunt quail better'n me. This dog is both a pointer and a retriever. He is mine! Paid for with cash money. And what's more, I aim to keep him! I wouldn't swap him to you for yore team of bays with that no-account fiddle of yore'n throwed in to boot!"

Doc felt his temper getting away from him. He was mighty touchy about his bays, and as for his beloved fiddle, he would rather part with ten years of his life than that.

He grabbed at his temper and held it down. "Nobody's tryin' to swap yuh out of that dog," he said. "I was just sayin' he is a nice lookin' animal. Me, I ain't got no more use for a bird dog than a pig has for hip pockets."

MacLoyd didn't believe him, and the look he gave the old swapper said so. He snorted and bit off another cow-choking chew.

"Well, now that yuh're here, what do yuh want?"

"Nothin'," Doc answered innocently, his mind busy with the problem of getting the red dog and having a well dug near his barn to boot. "When yuh goin' on a hunt with that dog?"

"No matter. I ain't takin' you along."

"Don't blame yuh," Doc said, letting just the right amount of sarcasm creep into his voice. "If I was you, I wouldn't want anybody along to see what a poor huntin' dog I had bought."

"That dog," MacLoyd declared hotly, "is guaranteed to—"

"And yuh're the kind who believes anything he hears."

"Doc," the bean-pole sheriff roared, "I got a good mind to take yuh with me and prove—"

"Got somethin' else to do besides go huntin'. Got to dig a well near my barn. Tired of carryin' water."

"Phooey!" MacLoyd exploded. "Yuh're too fat and lazy to dig a post hole, let alone a well. Yuh can't use that for a excuse to not go huntin' with me. Tomorrow mornin'—"

Doc sighed sadly. "That's the way it goes. I get all set to dig a well, and then yuh make me go huntin' with yuh. All right, I'll pick yuh up in the mornin' in my wagon. Reckon we better plan to make a two-day hunt of it. Understand

birds is scarce this year. You furnish the grub."

Doc saw by the stony look that leaped into the sheriff's face that he'd overstepped a mite when he'd suggested that MacLoyd furnish the grub.

"On second thought," he added quickly, "we'll each feed hisself."

"Now yuh're talkin' sense," MacLoyd said, looking like the cat that had eaten the canary.

In fact, he felt mighty pleased with himself. Not only, so he figured, had he forced Doc to go hunting with him and furnish the transportation to boot, but also he had fixed it so Doc would have to feed himself. As for Doc, things had worked out exactly as he'd planned. Smiling inwardly, he departed.

Of course, he hadn't any idea how he would get possession of Red Boy and his well dug to boot, but this quail hunt would take place along Sugar Creek, which flowed through Sugar Valley. Nesters were beginning to settle the valley. Nesters were swappers, and Doc aimed to get some swapping done as well as watch the sheriff's new dog work. Swapping sharpened Doc's mind to the point where he could just about figure out any kind of a scheme. Yep, Doc reckoned, things were coming along.

WHISTLING softly, he ambled along the one street, paying little attention to anything. Just as he came to Jeff Weber's store, a quick step sounded, and a hand clutched his arm.

"Mister," a voice said hoarsely, "watch out!"

Startled, Doc turned to the owner of the voice and saw a youngish, horse-faced man in a green-striped, too small suit. Fear shone out of a pair of wide, blue eyes under a battered hat.

"You was about to walk under a ladder," the man said.

Doc blinked. Sure enough, he had been all set to walk under the ladder Jeff had left leaning against the store front where he'd been painting the new sign.

"Walkin' under a ladder," the stranger went on huskily, "is like stickin' yore head in a lion's mouth!"

Strangers always fascinated Doc Swap. Never knew what a stranger had to swap off, or what you might learn from one. Besides, this hombre was homelier than a basketful of toads.

"Thank yuh kindly," Doc said gravely. "If it wasn't for you, likely I'd have busted a leg or somethin' by now, Mr.—"

"People call me Peach Twig Pickford," the young man said. "I'm from Arkansas an' am on my way to Hopper Springs to visit my Uncle Juniper Pickford. Mebbe yuh've heard of him?"

Doc beamed. "Know him well."

"Mebbe yuh'd tell me the shortest way to Hopper Springs? I'm walkin' there."

"Do tell!" Doc said, doing some quick thinking. "Seems as though Peach Twig is kind of queer for a name."

The young man smiled, exposing a row of buck teeth. "Ain't so queer when yuh realize that I am the best water-witcher in Arkansas. Give me a peach limb fork, and I can locate water on a desert. I'm a—oh, dearie-oh!"

"What's the matter?"

"A black cat! If he crosses yore path, yuh'd better turn around and go the other way, pronto!"

The cat suddenly wheeled and turned away from the boardwalk.

Peach Twig let out a sigh of relief. "That was a close one. But as I was sayin', give me a—"

"I'm headin' toward Hopper Springs tomorrow mornin'," Doc said, "so yuh can ride with me. Goin' to do a little quail huntin' and swappin' on the way, but ridin's allus better'n walkin'."

The young man smiled. "I'll be right proud to ride."

"In the meantime," Doc said hopefully, "mebbe yuh'd come home with me to spend the night. To pass away the time, yuh might pick a likely spot near my barn to dig a well."

"Glad to," Peach Twig nodded, falling into step beside the old swapper. "I'd even be glad to look yore place over and see if yuh got anything about that'd bring yuh bad luck. A feller's got to be careful about having unlucky jiggers around his home."

"Peach Twig," Doc said solemnly, "it's shore a lucky thing I met you. Likely you'll save me from a heap of trouble."

Peach Twig smiled happily. He allowed that Doc Swap was a right smart man, considering the fact he hadn't been born

and reared in Arkansas.

After an early supper, the two went outside. The young man cut a peach twig from a tree and proceeded to walk about the barn in search of a suitable place for Doc to dig his new well. Just as he passed the double doors, the fork of the twig slowly bent toward the ground.

"Here yuh are, Doc," Peach Twig called.

Quickly Doc drove a stake at the indicated spot. He didn't tell the young man that almost any place you dug a hole in the sandy soil of Dry Bluffs, you'd find water.

"Yuh know," he said thoughtfully, "if I was to furnish a spade, mebbe yuh'd like to do a little diggin' just to prove—"

Peach Twig shuddered slightly. "Doc," he murmured, "diggin' is entirely out of my line."

"I was afraid of that," Doc sighed.

AT SUNUP the next morning, Doc and the young Arkansawyer hooked Doc's sleek bays to the covered wagon in which Doc hauled his swapping goods. It was a fine fall morning with just the right snap to it for good quail hunting. Twenty minutes later, they pulled up in front of the jail.

The sheriff was waiting for them, his new bird dog at his heels, a double-barreled shotgun cradled in his arm, and an assortment of gear strewn about his big feet.

MacLoyd started to toss his bed roll into the wagon, but didn't. His face assumed a stony expression.

"Doc," he said, "yuh ain't got a blessed thing in this wagon except yore campin' outfit. I brought along just enough grub for myself. If yuh think I'm goin' to divide with you and that scarecrow in the green suit, yuh're loco!"

"Don't worry about us," Doc retorted. "And I might add that although Peach Twig may look like a scarecrow, he's a mighty valuable man to have along. He knows all the signs that point to good huntin'. In fact, he knows everything that means good or bad luck, besides bein' a water-witcher. Peach Twig, say that poem for the sheriff."

The young man grinned and began in a sing-songy voice:

"Remember if yuh sneeze on Monday, yuh sneeze for danger;
"Sneeze on Tuesday, kiss a stranger;
"Sneeze on Thursday, somethin' better;
"Sneeze on Friday, sneeze for sorrow;
"Sneeze on Saturday, see yore sweetheart tomorrow."

MacLoyd cussed expertly. "I got no hankerin' to get mixed up with a swappin' spree and a idiot all at the same time," he said. "I ain't goin' on no quail hunt with yuh. G'by."

"Afraid that dog'll make a fool of yuh?" Doc sneered.

MacLoyd's face turned red. Snorting like a bull with a battle on his hands, he threw his gear into the wagon and climbed up on the spring seat beside the old swapper.

Peach Twig, to whom the dog had taken a great fancy, lifted the animal into the wagon. Doc shook out the lines, and they were on their way—for better, or for worse.

When they came to Sugar Creek, MacLoyd spotted what he thought was a likely looking place to give Red Boy his first work-out. Obligingly, Doc pulled his team to a stop, and men and dog piled out. Red Boy began to circle about expertly, and Doc knew that MacLoyd had a real hunter.

But he said, "Look at that fool dog runnin' around like a chicken with his head off."

MacLoyd glared. "Shut-up, yuh ole wind-bag! How can—"

His voice choked off, for Red Boy had frozen, his tail as stiff as a poker, his nose pointed at a clump of dry weeds. The three men advanced slowly. The dog held his point. MacLoyd looked as tense as a fiddle string.

When they reached gunshot range, MacLoyd clipped, "Get 'em up, boy!"

The dog leaped forward. There came a whir of wings, and the sheriff's gun went up for the kill. But at that moment, a shadowy form leaped from behind a rock. It was a stray black cat.

Peach Twig Pickford let out a frightened squawk and grabbed MacLoyd's left arm. The gun boomed out—but not a feather was ruffled. Doc had to clap his hands over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

"Wonder that gun didn't bust wide open!" Peach Twig gasped. "Shootin' over a black cat is like jumpin' off a cliff."

MacLoyd threw his gun on the ground and swore. "The next time yuh grab my arm—" he began.

"Lucky yuh didn't hit a bird," Peach Twig said blandly. "Mighty bad luck!"

"No use cryin' over spilt milk, Sheriff," Doc soothed. "Let's go on."

Shaking with anger, MacLoyd gathered up his gun, and the three men and dog trailed back to the wagon.

THEY made their next stop at "Mule" and Ida Turner's homestead. It was getting along towards noon, and Doc hadn't forgotten that Ida Turner was the best cook in Bluff County. They found Mule leaning against a rail fence, smoking his pipe.

"Mule, did yuh ever dig that well yuh was talkin' about last summer?" Doc asked.

Mule shook his head. "Nope. Couldn't decide where to dig it. Didn't want to come up with a dry hole."

"Peach Twig," Doc said, "reckon we could locate a likely place for a good well? 'Course, we'd want our dinners."

Peach Twig nodded. "Might. What's on for dinner?"

"Stewed chicken an' noodles," Mule answered. "Cherry pie."

"If yuh'll feed me and my friend from Arkansas," Doc said, "and do a couple hours' work the next time yuh come to town, I reckon we can make a deal."

Sheriff MacLoyd swallowed audibly as he thought of the dried jerky and cold biscuits in his pack. He called Doc to one side.

"How come yuh ain't includin' me in on that dinner?"

Doc shook his head sadly. "Yuh got yore own food and—Say, I might get yuh invited for—for six shotgun shells."

MacLoyd handed over the shells. In the meantime, Peach Twig was witching for water. Soon he located a place where he was positive that Mule would find a spring. Seeing the happy look on Mule's face, Doc wrangled an invitation for MacLoyd to share the Turners' dinner.

After eating, the men trooped outside, and Mule noticed the red bird dog.

"If I had some shells," he said, "I'd go huntin' myself."

Doc produced the six shells. For them he obtained an ax, an old sausage grinder, a fat hen, a large wooden bucket, and an old horseshoe to boot. Not that Doc needed the horseshoe, but Peach Twig Pickford allowed that a horseshoe was about the luckiest gadget a man could have around.

"Even better'n this rabbit foot I allus carry," he declared.

Once again jolting along the Sugar Creek trail, MacLoyd began to scan the countryside for a good place to hunt quail.

"If I'd had any sense," he growled, "I'd have brought my saddle hoss. A man can't cut acrost country when he rides—"

"Yuh can get out an' walk any place yuh want to," Doc said.

MacLoyd was no hand to walk. Besides, he had on his high-heeled riding boots. He shook his head and said no more.

A little later, they met a man riding a pinto. He was Ben Grant, a deputy from Osage County, and his seamy face wore a worried frown.

"Ain't seen a black-whiskered stranger on foot, have yuh?" he inquired.

Doc shook his head. "What's the trouble, Ben?"

"Sheriff Orange and me was takin' a prisoner to the railroad," Ben answered. "Danged if he didn't cabbage onto the sheriff's forty-five and get plumb away. The sheriff sent me over this way for a look-see. This hombre's name is Willy Wilson, and he's as mean as a stepped-on rattler!"

"I better head back for town," MacLoyd gurgled. "I—"

"Ain't afraid of meetin' this Willy hombre, are yuh?" Doc asked pointedly.

"'Course not!" MacLoyd said. "It's just when a outlaw is on the loose, a sheriff ought to be home doin' his duty."

"In a ole covered wagon like this," Doc said wisely, "a desperado wouldn't expect to find a sheriff an' he wouldn't hesitate to show hisself. We might run onto him."

MacLoyd's bony fingers played with the slick barrel of his shotgun. Slowly he smiled.

"Doc," he admitted grudgingly, "mebbe yuh ain't as dumb as yuh look."

"Oh, dearie-oh!" Peach Twig gasped. "Another black cat!"

Just as Deputy Ben Grant had turned

away, a thin black animal had crossed the man's trail.

"Mister," Peach Twig pleaded huskily, "don't go that a-way. Turn—"

HIS warning came too late. The deputy's horse shied violently, throwing Grant from the saddle. The man got up, swearing, caught the horse and vaulted back into the saddle. From the odor that filled the air, it was apparent that the animal was no cat.

But the young man ignored the skunky smell. "That's what a feller gets for crossing a black cat's trail," he said sadly. "I'd ruther face a forty-five any ole day than a black cat!"

MacLoyd eyed him curiously, but said nothing. Doc said, "Giddap," and the bay team settled into their collars.

They came to where a rutty lane veered off toward Ike Johnson's homestead, and Doc turned into it.

Immediately MacLoyd began to protest. "Looky," he ranted, "did we come on a huntin' trip, or didn't we?"

"Might be some quail up this way," Doc murmured.

MacLoyd expressed his disgust vividly. Turning a deaf ear to the sheriff's swearing, Doc drove on. Emerging from a strip of timber, they came upon the Johnson place. Ike himself sat on a chopping block near his woodpile, looking glum.

"Just hit a spike in a stick of wood with my ax," he said. "Knocked a chunk out of the blade as big as a half-dollar."

Doc reached back into the wagon and came up with the ax he'd gotten from Mule Turner. "Might swap this for—"

"Wait," Peach Twig cried hoarsely.

He grabbed the ax from Doc and carefully scrutinized the handle.

"It's all right," he said at last to Ike. "Yuh're safe in swappin' for this ax."

"Whatta yuh mean, safe?" Ike wanted to know.

"Where I come from," the young man explained, "when a man puts a new handle in his ax, he carves his wife's initials on it for luck. It's bad luck if anybody gets a ax with somebody else's wife's initials on it."

"Phooey!" MacLoyd snorted. "Can't see why it'd be lucky for a man to carve his wife's initials on an ax."

"Most women are so proud to have their husbands do that," Peach Twig explained, "that they don't object to usin' the ax themselves."

Ike was greatly impressed. "By gravy!" he exclaimed. "I'm shore goin' to try that! Anything I hate is choppin' wood."

Doc traded him the ax. For it he got Ike's promise of three hours' work, a fresh peach pie, a sack of cornmeal, an old block and tackle and a mirror to boot.

Peach Twig shook his head sadly when he saw the mirror. "Doc," he warned, "if that thing gets busted, we're in for seven years of bad luck, rabbit foot, hoss-shoe, or no!"

Doc kept the mirror in spite of the warning. He was no hand to discard anything that might be of future swapping value.

Leaving Ike busily carving his wife's initials on the ax handle, Doc drove back to the Sugar Creek Trail. A mile on west, MacLoyd called a halt beside a weedy corn patch.

"Just the place for quail," he declared.

They piled from the wagon and turned the dog loose. Red Boy headed into the wind, his fine nose fanning for scent. Suddenly Peach Twig let out a little yip and ran back to the wagon. He returned with the horseshoe in his fist.

"A man might as well have all the luck on his side," he said, giving Doc and the sheriff a buck-toothed grin.

"If yuh grab my arm this time," the sheriff said grimly, "yuh'll need more'n a hoss-shoe for luck!"

At that moment, Red Boy froze in a point.

Silently the men edged forward. Coming within range, the sheriff began to lift his gun. That was the moment when Peach Twig thought he saw a snake in a clump of dried grass.

With a wild hoot, he threw the iron shoe. It sailed over Red Boy's set head and into the grass. The quail whirred into the air, catching MacLoyd off balance. Before he could aim, the birds were well out of range. Then before he could find a suitable word to match his feelings, Red Boy had leaped into the weeds and was out with his head held at a proud angle. Between his jaws nestled one plump quail.

"Whatta yuh know!" Peach Twig gloated. "That must've been a quail's head I seen instead of a snake. Anyway, I got me a bird!"

STUNNED speechless, MacLoyd could only stand and stare as Red Boy laid the quail near the young man's number twelve shoes. Doc knew better than to laugh openly, so he hid his glee behind his ragged white whiskers.

As for Peach Twig, he recovered the horseshoe and patted it fondly. "Just as I allus said," he said with a smile. "Give a man a hoss-shoe, and his worries is over."

Like a man who had received a heavy blow, Sheriff MacLoyd staggered to the wagon and climbed in. Doc and the young man followed.

"Doc," MacLoyd asked weakly, "how much will yuh take to drive me back to Dry Bluffs before I go plumb loco?"

"Let's see," Doc murmured. "Must be ten, fifteen miles. If yuh'll give me that bird dog, I'll drive yuh back."

"Drive on!" MacLoyd said bleakly. "Drive on!"

Along toward sundown, they arrived at Homer Prutt's tar-papered shack with the leanto workship in the rear. A bachelor, Homer farmed for his living, but invented contraptions because that was the great passion of his life. So far, not one invention had ever turned out the way he'd planned. Now he sat in the doorway of his workshop, staring at an odd-shaped box affair that bristled with cogwheels. He had a hopeless expression on his sunburned face.

"Dog-gone!" he said, seeing Doc Swap. "Got my mechanical hog-caller all put together an' can't work it."

"Hog-caller?" Doc said.

"Yep. Just turn a crank, an' this invention sounds just exactly like a hog eatin' ear corn. Figure that when hogs hear it, they'll come runnin', thinkin' they will get some corn, too. Only trouble is, I ain't got a crank to turn it with."

"That's a downright shame," Doc sympathized. "Mebbe—"

He lifted the old sausage grinder from the floor of the wagon, and Homer's red-rimmed eyes fixed on the crank.

"How much?" he asked hoarsely.

For the grinder, Doc got three four-by-fours ten feet long, a dozen eggs, a picture book and Homer's promise of a half-day's work the next time he came to Dry Bluffs.

As they headed toward Sugar Creek and Doc's favorite camping spot on the right bank, Sheriff MacLoyd eyed him coldly.

"Doc, why would yuh want the four-by-fours?" he asked. "And why're yuh getting everybody to promise to do some work for yuh?"

Doc grinned. "I'll use them four-by-fours for a tripod and fasten the block-and-tackle to 'em to hist the dirt out of my new well. I intend to put them nesters to work, doin' the diggin'."

MacLoyd caught a horsefly in mid-air with a stream of tobacco juice and swore softly. Peach Twig Pickford turned admiring eyes on old Doc Swap.

"Doc," he said, "I figured that all the smart people either lived in or was from Arkansas. But now I know I've been mistaken."

"Thank yuh," Doc said modestly.

That evening, in the glow of a cheerful campfire, Doc and the young man began to prepare a feast with the food which Doc had accumulated. MacLoyd dug out his dried beef and cold biscuits and began to eat, but smelling the chicken roasting over the fire spoiled his appetite for cold victuals.

At last, he sighed sadly and asked, "Doc, how about me throwin' my grub in with yours, and the three of us sharin' alike?"

Although the sheriff had quite an assortment, Doc refused flatly until MacLoyd offered to add a new blanket and his cooking utensils to boot. Then the deal was made, and the sheriff joined the feast. Doc was a good cook.

But even the roast chicken didn't altogether make MacLoyd happy. He kept remembering back to the two times he'd missed shooting quail. As for Doc, he was slightly unhappy himself. He couldn't complain about his swapping business, but as yet he hadn't any idea of how to get MacLoyd's dog.

If he didn't beat the sheriff out of Red Boy, Doc reckoned he wouldn't be able to sleep good at nights for the next six months.

PEACH TWIG, his stomach filled to capacity, a buck-toothy smile on his innocent face, leaned back against a stump and began to count the stars within a hazy circle about the full moon.

"—seven, eight," he finished. "Goin' to rain in eight days."

"Phooey!" MacLoyd snorted.

"Ought to have my well finished by then," Doc murmured, wrapping the new blanket about himself. That was the last thing he remembered until he awoke the next morning.

At sunup, MacLoyd heeled his dog and headed through the frosty timber after giving Peach Twig and Doc specific instructions not to follow. Also, he refused flatly to take along the horse-shoe.

Later, when he returned empty-handed, Peach Twig took one look at the bony sheriff's grim face and was wise enough to make no comments. By then Doc had his team harnessed and hooked to the wagon. By mid-morning, they were on their way again, heading leisurely toward Hopper Springs.

MacLoyd stared glumly straight ahead. Occasionally he would mutter something about going hunting with two idiots. Doc ignored these mutterings and kept a straight face to boot. Inwardly, he was as happy as a baby with a new rattle. Nothing he liked better than to see his old friendly-enemy in a sweat. When they came to the road that led to the Zoop homestead, he turned into it.

"Doc," MacLoyd growled, "so help me, if I ever go any place with you again, I hope I break a leg!"

Doc began to whistle softly. Presently they came in sight of an unpainted house. Leaning against a warped cottonwood stood a small man. He was Themistocles Whetstone Zoop. The real head of the family was Mrs. Zoop, who was busily building a fire in the front yard. A huge iron kettle and Rebecca Zenobia, six years old and spoiled, stood near the fire.

Doc pulled his bays to a stop and swept off his hat. "Fine mornin'," he observed. "Just right for soap makin'."

A horrified look on his horse-face, Peach Twig gasped, "Makin' soap in the light of the moon? Ain't yuh heard, 'Make soap in the full moon, it's light and fluffy and not worth a whistle tune?' "

"Come to think of it," Themistocles murmured, "I have heard that."

"Me, too," Mrs. Zoop said, pulling Rebecca Zenobia away from the fire, "but I'd plumb forgot it."

She was suddenly so grateful to Peach Twig for saving her from spoiling her soap by making it in the light of the moon that she invited the three travelers to stay for dinner.

At that moment, Rebecca Zenobia screwed her small face into a frown and began to wail, "I wanta make soap!"

The wail turned into a bellow, and Mrs. Zoop wrung her hands helplessly.

"Ain't nothin' to do but make the soap, I guess," she said.

Doc held up the picture book he'd gotten from Homer Prutt. Immediately the child stopped crying and reached for it.

"Want to sell that?" Themistocles asked hopefully.

Doc was a swapper, not a seller. He shook his head. "Might consider makin' a trade."

For the book, he got a fair spade, a pitchfork, a gallon of sweet cider and a promise that Themistocles would come to town and do some well-digging.

As he ate Mrs. Zoop's well-cooked dinner, Doc did some calculating. Up to date, he had four men to help dig his well, plus the necessary tools. Not bad, considering he'd started out with an empty wagon, not counting Peach Twig Pickford.

But Doc was beginning to worry. Although he had given MacLoyd a very satisfying run-around on this trip, he hadn't found any means of becoming the owner of Red Boy. The thought almost made Doc lose his appetite. Almost, but not quite. He managed to eat a second piece of pie and top that off with a hunk of chocolate cake.

THAT afternoon when they came to the cottonwoods that bordered the creek, MacLoyd called a halt. A scattering of chokeberry bushes seemed to offer an ideal place for quail. Heeling his dog, he headed that way. Peach Twig grabbed up the horse-shoe and started to follow.

"No yuh don't!" MacLoyd roared angrily.

He twisted the shoe from the young man's hand and hurled it back into the

wagon. There followed a terrific crash of shattering glass, and Peach Twig's face paled.

"Sheriff," he gasped, "yuh busted the mirror!"

At that moment, Red Boy pointed. But for some reason, perhaps it was the crash of glass, or the nervousness in Peach Twig's voice, he failed to hold the point. He flushed the birds, a good dozen of them, before the sheriff was ready. MacLoyd's gun thundered, but not a bird fell.

"See!" Peach Twig wailed. "For the next seven years, yuh might as well forget about goin' quail huntin'."

Bony face pale, MacLoyd staggered back to the wagon. Doc obligingly helped him up to the spring seat.

"Too bad," Doc said sadly. "Why don't yuh give me that dog so's yuh won't be tempted to go huntin' any more?"

"Doc," MacLoyd said hoarsely, "I don't believe in signs!" He turned his pale eyes on the man from Arkansas. "Doc," he went on, "do yuh think I could get away with a murder?"

Doc grinned. "Not after bustin' that mirror."

Unaware of the sheriff's baleful glance, Peach Twig was lifting Red Boy back into the covered wagon.

They came to "Loop" and "Puney" Porter's log cabin, and found the two old bachelors for once not quarreling. They sat in the door of their corn crib, looking extremely sad.

"Give a stranger his dinner today," Loop said.

"And danged if he didn't run off with our ole black tomcat," Puney added.

"Or that blasted cat follered him," Loop finished.

"Yuh're lucky to be shed of a black cat," Peach Twig said.

"No such thing!" Loop snapped. "Best ratter in the county."

And then Puney saw the pitchfork in Doc's wagon. "Just what I need," he declared. "Busted my fork this mornin'."

Of course, he got the fork. Doc got two white ducks and five bushels of ear corn to boot. Knowing the Porters' aversion to work, he left them out of his well-digging project.

The old swapper headed back along the trail, following the creek to the crossing. When they approached a thick growth of brush and timber, MacLoyd squared his thin shoulders.

"Once again I am goin' to work my dog," he said pointedly. "Kindly listen careful, yuh two wooden-headed jaspers. You are to stay in this wagon! Understand? The first one that tries to follow me will get a handful of bird shot in the seat of his pants! Is that clear?"

Both Doc and Peach Twig allowed they understood perfectly. MacLoyd started to climb from the wagon. Red Boy leaped past him, striking his left leg. MacLoyd's foot slipped off the wheel hub, and he fell flat on his bony face.

"Too bad yuh busted that mirror," Peach Twig murmured.

The sheriff started to his feet, swearing. At that moment, a stranger stepped from among the trees. He was a big man with a round face full of black whiskers. His eyes were two beady dots. In his hand, he held a six-gun.

"Don't try to pick up that shotgun!" he warned MacLoyd harshly.

MacLoyd took one look at the man and let the shotgun lie.

The man eyed Doc's bay team approvingly. "Just what I need to make my getaway," he said. "When one hoss gets tired, I'll ride the other. Fatty, climb off that seat and unhook yore team. Hossface, you can help fatty!"

Doc and the young man lost no time in obeying.

"You must be the feller that got away from the sheriff," Peach Twig murmured.

"Smart, sonny," the man said. "Unbuckle them lines."

PEACH TWIG unbuckled the lines and handed them over.

"You three hombres walk into that timber," the man ordered. "I'm goin' to tie yuh up where yuh won't be found for some time. These lines oughta hold yuh. Get goin'!"

Peach Twig led the way, following a path which led through the trees. Doc and MacLoyd trailed. Doc felt a trickle of sweat work through his left eyebrow and run down into his eye. He didn't like the set-up. He was mighty fond of his bay team.

Red Boy, believing this was another quail hunt, began to circle into the

bushes. Suddenly there came a yelp from the dog and the howl of a cat. It was the Porters' black tomcat. Tail bushed, the cat raced across the path in front of Peach Twig Pickford. That young man sucked in a harsh breath and froze.

"Keep movin'!" the outlaw commanded.

Peach Twig didn't budge. His face had lost all color, and his breath was whistling in and out of his gaping mouth.

"Yuh heard me!" the outlaw roared. "Move on!"

Peach Twig's Adam's apple did a nose dive. He whirled about. Something flashed in his big fist. It was the horse-shoe.

"Feller," he wheezed, "I wouldn't cross the trail of that black cat for nothin'!"

He threw the horse-shoe with all his might.

The outlaw ducked, but not quite fast enough. The shoe caught him on the forehead. It sounded like a hard knuckle against a ripe melon. The outlaw's six-gun roared, the bullet clipped leaves from a tall elm. His buckling knees let him sink slowly to the ground.

"What hit me?" he gasped and keeled over.

Staring down at the man, Doc had a sudden inspiration. Now, he knew, he had Sheriff MacLoyd over a barrel.

Without a word, the old swapper turned on his heel and waddled back to his wagon. Whistling softly, he began to harness his team. Peach Twig had followed closely and began to help. MacLoyd had clapped handcuffs on the outlaw and was dragging him back along the path.

"This," MacLoyd said, looking pleased for the first time that day, "is shore goin' to be a feather in my cap."

Doc's innocent baby face glowed like a light. He ignored the sheriff and his captive. "Climb in, Peach Twig," he said, "and we'll go on toward Hopper Springs. Ought to make it by tomorrow noon."

The pleased look left the sheriff's thin face. "Hey," he yelped, "yuh got to haul me an' this owlhoot back to Dry Bluffs—not to Hopper Springs!"

Doc looked extremely pained about the whole affair. "Sorry," he said, "but I kinda promised to take Peach Twig to his Uncle Juniper. Kinda want to visit with Juniper, too."

MacLoyd sputtered. "But yuh can't leave me out here with a prisoner to walk clean back to Dry Bluffs. I got on my ridin' boots!"

"Yuh're the sheriff," Doc said disinterestedly. "Gettin' y o r e owlhooter locked up in jail is yore worry, not mine."

The blank look on the sheriff's face was suddenly replaced with an expression of understanding. Anger leaped into his eyes. "All right!" he exploded. "So yuh want that bird dog to haul me back to town! Well, yuh can go straight to blazes!"

"Would want some boot, too," Doc said blandly. "Mebbe if yuh'd throw in a half day's work on my new well, I'd make a trade."

MacLoyd swore fiercely. His face a brick red, he helped his prisoner to wobbly feet and started prodding him eastward along the trail. After some twenty limping steps, the bony old sheriff stopped and faced about.

"All right, Doc," he said humbly. "You win!"

Jolting back along the trail toward Dry Bluffs, Doc felt fine. In fact, it had been a long time since he'd felt so satisfied with the results of a swapping spree. As for Peach Twig Pickford, he had offered no objections to walking the rest of the way to Hopper Springs and had been very happy with the horse-shoe and the grub Doc had given him. Too, by making a slight detour, the young man hadn't had to cross the trail of the black cat.

As for Red Boy, he lay curled up on the new blanket in the shade of his new owner's canvas wagon cover, sleeping blissfully.

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NEXT ISSUE

DOC SWAP'S SURPRISE

Another Tradin' Hombre Yarn by BEN FRANK

Bullets Talk LOUD

The outlaw heard a sharp command from behind him

The saga of Jim Gillett—Second in a new series of exciting true stories of Famous Texas Rangers!

By HAROLD PREECE

THE three Rangers sneaked up quietly behind the one-room shanty. Their noses caught the smell of the mash souring in Old Man Potter's still. Their ears heard the bear-like growl of burly Dick Dublin. The big man was cussing them loud and plenty to Kimble County's champion moonshine maker.

"I ain't holin' up here to dodge 'em," they heard him boasting. "Why, I wrangled steers with the three little wolverines down in Menard County 'fore they was big enough to shave their fuzz. If I run across 'em, I'm just naturally goin' to quirt whip 'em like dogs. And the one that'll git it the worst is Jim Gillett, 'cause he's the lead dog and them Banister boys just bark like a pack when he bays."

Two of the Rangers winked at their companion, a strapping six-footer wearing a corporal's badge. The corporal raised his hand. Catfooted, the three stepped from behind the house and drew beads on the pair.

Bullet Splits Jug

They saw Dick Dublin pick up a jug of Old Man Potter's lightning juice and h'ist it to his lips. The corporal pulled the trigger. The raw corn liquor splashed on the outlaw's uncombed black beard. It spilled into his eyes and nose and ran down his greasy shirt. Old Man Potter

whirled around, saw the three man-hunters and yelled:

"Run, Dick, run! Here's them dang Rangers!"

"Dublin, halt and surrender!" the corporal called. The outlaw whirled around. His eyes froze in terror as he recognized Jim Gillett, come to arrest him for the killing of an old neighbor back in Coryell County.

Fifty feet behind Gillett, stood John and Will Banister, their rifles were cocked to cover their comrade, and Dick Dublin saw that he would be mowed down if he touched a trigger.

Outlaw's Quick Exit

The outlaw's legs began working as fast as his tongue had been working a minute before. He ducked low and tore out into the brush. Jim Gillett gave Old Man Potter a quick shove that sent him sprawling into the arms of the Banister boys.

"Hold this old rooster while I go after his side-kick," he ordered. "We got the rest of the Dublins, and Dick won't get far."

Gillett sprang into the brush. In a minute he saw his prey sprinting for dear life, fifty yards away. Hoisting his carbine to his shoulder, he fired. The slug whistled past the outlaw's ear and tore into a cedar tree. The Ranger saw the fugitive disappear into a little ravine.

Gillet slowed up and cautiously approached the outlaw's hiding place. Concealing himself behind a clump of dewberry bushes, Gillett lay on the ground, keeping his eyes and his ears peeled. Then he heard the outlaw panting like a scared rabbit a few feet away.

The Ranger eased forward. Dick Dublin was sitting on a rock, his face white with fear and his breath coming hard.

"For the last time, Dick, surrender!" the Ranger yelled.

Dublin Continues Flight

Dick Dublin looked up. He saw fate marching toward him in the person of the twenty-one year old boy he had been threatening to quirt whip. And again he started running.

Gillett stopped for a second and drew a bead on the fleeing outlaw, now moving in a tired lope because his wind was gone. Still running, Dublin bent low and threw back his hand under his rough coat for his six-shooter. Gillett's bullet hit him square in the back, and tore down through his hip.

The last of the Dublin killers lay sprawled across a patch of fern. And as Jim Gillett stood over the mountainous corpse, he reckoned that one more gang had been put out of commission in outlaw-infested Kimble County.

Old Man Potter, the leader of the gang, was stowed away in the Llano County jail. So was his youngest boy, Dell, who had not run like a coyote from the Rangers, but had stood his ground like a man. When Gillett and the Banisters had raided the Luke Stone ranch after midnight, they had found Dell Dublin asleep in a bunk.

Dell Defies Rangers

Dell had bared his breast and dared the Rangers to shoot him. Dick, riding up to the ranch, had hit the wind when he saw the Rangers bringing out his brother.

Dell and the old man would probably hang. Dick had saved Texas the expense of carrying him back to Coryell County for the cold-blooded murder of Jim Williams.

Jim Gillett wiped away the smoke trailing from his gun. He had been a crack shot ever since he had quit school at twelve to pot wild turkeys.

"Bullets talk louder than books," he had said scornfully to his teacher in Austin. When he became a Ranger, he learned that bullet talk was the only talk listened to in Kimble County.

And in that year of 1877, the bullets of Corporal Jim Gillett talked long and loud. Day after day, he rode and shot with the crack Ranger command of Lieutenant N. O. Reynolds. Day after day, he beat wanted men to the draw and carried them to Junction, the county seat. There they were tried under the trees by stern-faced frontier judges. Kimble County had no courthouse to protect their proceedings from the elements.

"We'll burn it if you build it," the outlaws had told the terrorized citizens. But, often, the trees under which criminals were tried became their gallows. And

often, Jim Gillett helped out with the hangings.

The outlaw population was thinning out in Kimble County. Only one notorious bad man was left of all those who had come swarming in like the wild bees. That man was a pint-sized, trigger-happy killer named Starke Reynolds—no relation to Lieutenant Reynolds. Jim Gillett swore to get him.

One hot morning, Gillett and five other Rangers were riding as an escort behind a wagon load of shackled prisoners being taken to Austin. The rough road ran directly past Starke Reynolds' ranch. The party came to a bend in the road. There they saw Starke Reynolds mounted on a fine horse, staring at them.

Quickly, the outlaw dumped a sack of flour he had been carrying. Then he wheeled his horse and made for the Llano Bottoms, three miles away.

Gillett, Lieutenant Reynolds, and another Ranger galloped into the brush after him. Mesquite thorns ripped their faces. Their horses were bleeding from the savage catclaw. Then deep in the brush, they lost the trail.

"He's getting away from us," Gillet called to his commander. "Must I go after him?"

"Get That Man!"

Blood was running down Lieutenant Reynolds' torn face. The bosom of his white shirt was stained red.

"Yes," the commander shouted back. "Stop him or kill him."

Gillett switched the bridle reins to his left hand. As quickly, he drew his gun with his right. Urging on his pony, he raced ahead. Then he found himself looking into Starke Reynolds' gun.

The outlaw stood on a little mound below the Ranger. Gillett looked at the nervous, twitching fingers holding the gun. He saw that the pistol was drawn in a bead on him. He heard the outlaw yell:

"Stop, or I'll kill you!"

Again Gillett gave his pony the spur. The horse made a quick lunge, neighing shrilly as its hoofs flashed down the path to the mound. Gillett leaped from the pony, gun cocked and ready to shoot. But Starke Reynolds jumped from his horse and hid behind it.

The outlaw's mount was scared. It whirled around, leaving its master exposed. Gillett fired. The bullet whined past the outlaw's head, missing it by a bare inch. Again, Starke Reynolds dodged behind his horse—only to hear a sharp command from behind, and then feel the press of cold steel in his back. When the horse turned once more, Gillett grinned at his Ranger comrade, Dave Ligon, who was slipping cuffs on the hands of the killer.

"Heard the shootin'," said Dave Ligon. Pointing to Starke Reynolds. "You're holdin' his attention gave me a chance to slip up on this bad man."

Starke Reynolds was cussing and swearing vengeance on Jim Gillett when they loaded him into the wagon. The outlaw was sent to the State Penitentiary at Huntsville.

Gillett, promoted to sergeant for his work in Kimble County, went to the toughest spot in Texas. That spot was the Big Bend section of the Rio Grande. Texans had nicknamed it "Hell's Holiday." It was the stamping ground of rustlers, rogues, and cutthroats from both sides of the borders. To make it even more pleasant, it was the hideout of the Apache Indians, and the Apaches were riding and fighting under the leadership of their hard-bitten old chief, Victorio.

In 1879, Victorio and his warriors ran away from their reservation in New Mexico. They swung down into Texas and raided a ranch. Then they escaped into Old Mexico and slaughtered employees of the Juarez-Chihuahua stage line.

Cross Mexican Line

In a matter of hours, Jim Gillett and the Texas Rangers were on the soil of the Mexican Republic. There they joined forces with another great body of frontier fighters, the Mexican Rurales. Deep in the Mexican state of Coahuila, the pursuers sighted the Apaches on the steep cliffs of Canyon del Moranos.

The Texans and Mexicans pulled up clumps of bunch grass which they placed around their hat bands as camouflage. Then the Rurales began scaling the cliffs. Their Texan comrades remained below to cover them as they climbed.

Gillett was nibbling on a piece of Mexi-

can cheese when Apache bullets began whizzing around him. He spat out the cheese and looked up. A party of Apache snipers, perched on one of the cliffs, was concentrating its fire upon the Rangers. Another bullet whizzed by Gillett's head.

Dare Apache Slugs

Lieutenant Baylor, commanding the Rangers, ordered his men to charge. With bullets spattering around them, the Texans dashed up the cliff. Gillett came to a rock ledge about four feet high. An Apache rose up from behind the ledge, his cocked gun leveled at the white man. Gillett and the Indian fired together. The Apache went down from a Texas bullet that crashed through his body.

The border was cleared temporarily of Apaches. But there were still plenty of killers on the loose. And Gillett was soon on the trail of two of them—a precious pair of brothers named Abram and Enofrio Baca.

The Baca brothers had tanked up on *tequila* and invaded a Christmas party of the American colony in Socorro, New Mexico. Then they had murdered in cold blood, A. M. Conklin, a newspaper editor, who was acting as master of ceremonies. The year was 1880.

Gillett knew that the two murderers were nephews of Jose Baca, county judge of El Paso County. Judge Baca not only ran the biggest store in Ysleta where Gillett's company was stationed. He had tried through political pressure to move the Texas Rangers out of the county.

The Ranger sergeant assigned several trusted men to watch the Judge's house, day and night. In this manner, they finally captured Abram Baca. Gillett delivered the prisoner to Socorro and collected a reward of $250 from New Mexico Territory. Judge Baca had offered him more to let the killer escape.

"One thousand dollars cash," the judge had said pleadingly, "if you'll let him step out into the woods and get away."

Months passed. Abram Baca was lying in a New Mexico jail. But still Jim Gillett was keeping his eye out for Enofrio.

Then he learned that his man was clerking in a store at Saragossa, Mexico—four miles across the Rio Grande from Ysleta. Before sunup one morning, Gillett slipped across the border with his trusted friend, Ranger George Lloyd.

They saw nobody on the streets when they slipped into the drowsy village. The store had just opened. Enofrio Baca was waiting on a woman customer.

Killer Turns Pale

Gillett slipped up behind the murderer. 'All right, Baca," he said, "come along quietly or I'll blow your innards out."

Baca turned around, his face looking like a trapped animal's. The woman fell in a dead faint. The killer was shaking and his knees were knocking when they loaded him on Gillett's horse. Gillett climbed up behind him. Lloyd followed on his horse. Captors and captives headed back toward Texas.

Then all hell broke loose in Saragossa. Some Mexican had seen what was happening and the alarm had spread. Church bells rang; dogs barked; women screamed. The Rangers heard the clatter of hoofs behind them. Gillett looked back and saw fifty men following them on horseback. Enofrio Baca was shaking like jelly as the bullets flew by.

It was a tight scrape. But the hard-riding Rangers got their prisoner across the Rio Grande. They locked him up. Then Jim Gillette sat down to take the bawling-outs he expected.

Lieutenant Baylor threatened to cashier him for violating international law. The Mexican Government sent hot protests to the American Government. Washington, in turn, protested to the Governor of Texas. There was war talk along the border. Gillett got riled. He told his commander:

"Shucks, Baylor, if Mexico wants to start a war over a cussed killer, I reckon the Texas Rangers can handle it. And now, if I have to fight the whole plagued Mexican army by my lonesome, I'm taking Enofrio Baca back to Socorro."

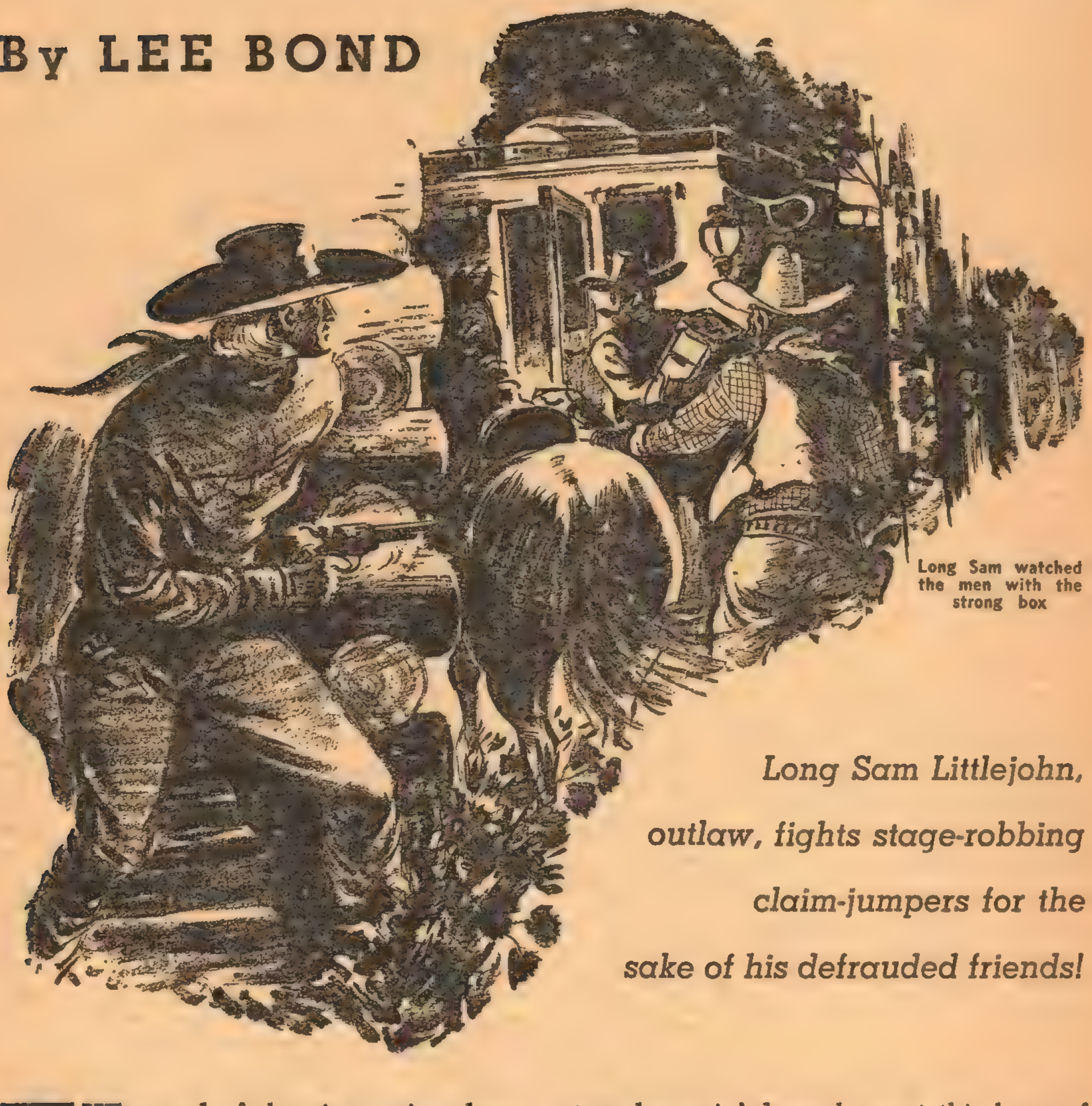
When Gillett reached Socorro, a mob seized Baca from him. The killer was taken to a telephone post outside of town and hanged without trial which was something that Baca's captor regretted.

Gillett retired from the Texas Rangers in 1881, a few months after the Baca incident. He wound up his six-year career in the force by capturing four members

(Concluded on page 107)

The Powdersmoke Prescription

By LEE BOND



Long Sam watched the men with the strong box

Long Sam Littlejohn, outlaw, fights stage-robbing claim-jumpers for the sake of his defrauded friends!

THE sound of the rig coming down the road brought a growl of annoyance from "Long Sam" Littlejohn's throat. He halted his big, hammer-headed roan, Sleeper, his annoyance changing to surprise as he listened in the black Texas night that would soon end.

"If that ain't a stage, I never heard one," he thought. "But what in blue blazes is a stage larrupin' down here at this hour of the night for?"

Long Sam swung out of saddle, a gaunt, tall man in black, from boots to flat-crowned Stetson. Ahead of him, perhaps two hundred yards, was the log way-station which Cole Barton ran for the stage company that operated a line from Turtle Shoal, on the Rio Grande, north to Sun-

dog. There were lights in the station, but Barton was an early riser, and Long Sam often dropped in to have breakfast with the lanky, graying Cole.

"But I'll get no breakfast this mornin'," Littlejohn grumbled. "That blamed stage is pullin' in, and it'll be daylight before they can change teams and head on south."

Outlawed, with a sizable reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam Littlejohn had to be eternally careful. Caution warned him to get back in the saddle, drift Sleeper off into the thick pine and oak timber, and make camp.

But curiosity was more potent than caution. Long Sam heard voices as the stage swung in before the station, and started easing forward through the timber, bony hands absently touching the butts of twin six-shooters that rode his thighs in tied-down holsters. He had come within a dozen paces of the back wall of the station when he heard a horse move in the black shadows.

Long Sam flattened out on the ground, smoke-colored eyes boring the shadows. When that horse moved he had heard the squeal of saddle leather, and caught the low tones of a man's voice, swearing uneasily. Now he could distinguish the dark bulk of the horse, and some man who wore a light Stetson was at the corner of the building.

Long Sam slid a six-shooter from holster and was starting silently towards the man when he heard boots slogging as someone hurried along the north wall.

"Here, Ben!" the man in the white Stetson called.

LONG SAM halted. There were two men there now, and the outlaw's eyes were straining to follow their swift movements.

"Give me that other box, Curly Polk, and get out of here!" a deep voice said.

"Yuh sound scared, Ben," "Curly" Polk chuckled. "Better simmer down, or old Ike Nolan will notice. Here's the box yuh're to kick off the boot when the boys hold you up, down the line."

"Cut out yore fool gab, and give me that strongbox, Polk!" Ben's deep voice growled. "Here's the one with the pay roll in it, and yuh shore better hit the high spots!"

"Man, yuh're shakin' like a feller with malaria chills!" Curly snickered.

"Shut that big mouth, and get out of here with that *dinero,*" Ben cut in hoarsely. "There's a passenger on the stage, and that feller has got me so nervous I'm plumb spooky."

"A passenger?" Curly snapped. "Tafflin chartered this stage for the special run. What got into you and old Ike to let a passenger on a chartered stage?"

"Me and Ike both tried to keep this feller off the stage," Ben declared. "We told him it was chartered to Bart Tafflin. But that didn't saw ary bit of ice with this feller. He cocked the derby hat he wears down over one snake-mean eye, chawed a little harder on the cigar he keeps stuck in his mouth, and said he was fixin' to ride that stage whether me and Ike like it or not."

"Ben Chate, you and Ike let that drummer bluff yuh!" Curly snapped.

"Ike Nolan give in," Ben grunted. "He's the driver. That derby-hatted, cigar-chewin' feller wears a checkered store suit, a b'iled shirt, and button shoes. He calls hisself Shorty Smith. But the way them ice-cold gray eyes of his drills into a man—"

"All right, take this duplicate strong box and hightail before Ike and Cole Barton miss yuh!" Curly Polk cut in. "Me, I ain't worryin' none about yore Shorty Smith."

Shock was hammering along Long Sam Littlejohn's nerves in jolting waves. Maybe Curly wasn't worrying about that "Shorty Smith" jasper, but Long Sam was. The fellow Ben Chate had described could be but one man—Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal who worked out of Austin! And of all the badgemen in Texas, Joe Fry was Long Sam Littlejohn's bitterest enemy.

"Ho, you knot-head!" Curly Polk's voice made Long Sam jump.

Polk was beside his fiddle-footed horse, tying the strong box behind the cantle. Long Sam tightened his sweaty hand over the grips of his six-shooter. He catfooted forward and brought his six-shooter down on the white Stetson.

Curly Polk folded up like a wet sack. The horse shied and snorted, but Long Sam moved in fast, talking in low, soothing tones. He found a square metal box behind the bronc's saddle, hastily loosened

it, shouldered the strong box and started away. He had taken just two steps when a round, hard something punched his midriff.

"One wrong move, and this rifle goes off!" a voice said.

The voice was low-pitched, tense, and unmistakably the voice of a woman. And, behind him only a couple of paces, Long Sam could hear Curly Polk beginning to mutter as consciousness returned.

"Ma'am, listen!" Long Sam gulped. "If that gent on the ground wakes up and gets a gun in his fist—"

"You listen, whoever you are!" she cut in, voice low. "Go towards the timber, and go fast!"

Long Sam heaved a sigh of relief and marched off toward the timber where he had left Sleeper, the rifle barrel prodding his back.

"Wait!" she ordered suddenly. "I heard someone ahead of us."

"That's my hoss yuh hear, ma'am," Long Sam said guardedly.

"Do as you're told, unless you want trouble!" the woman said sharply. "Turn right, and unless you do—"

"Nadine Grady!" Long Sam said suddenly.

"You must have known me a long time, or you'd call me Nadine Tafflin, instead of Nadine Grady!" the girl said shakily. "Who are you?"

"Well, since your mother married that Bart Tafflin carpetbagger, five years ago, I sorta quit droppin' around to visit at the Stirrup Ranch, at that," the gaunt outlaw said gravely. "But I reckon yuh'd know Long Sam Littlejohn if yuh saw him, wouldn't you, Nadine?"

"Long Sam!" the girl gasped. "Oh, how *could* you do a thing like this, Sam?"

THERE was hurt in her voice, and Long Sam felt the gun removed from his spine. Then the girl was beside him.

"We've no time to talk now, Nadine," the outlaw said quietly. "Yuh got a hoss around here somewhere?"

"My horse is across the road," she said wearily. "I can't go after it until the stage has left, of course. Sam, Joyce and Dan Grady, my mother and father, were always your friends. When Captain Dan Grady died on the battlefield, but you returned, you told Mother and me we could always count on you as a friend. You were angry, I know, when Mother turned Cole Barton down and married Bart Tafflin. You disliked and mistrusted him. But stealing from Mother—"

Long Sam started to say something, but jerked his head around at the sound of a rider spurring fast, a roaring black hulk in the night.

"Let's get out of here!" he gulped. "That fool, Curly Polk, runnin' his hoss away like that'll draw attention."

"Curly Polk?" Nadine asked. "Sam, what makes you think that was Curly that just went past us? Why, he's one of the Stirrup riders!"

Long Sam hurried her into the timber, where Sleeper was waiting. He looped one of the handles of the strong box over the saddle-horn, told the girl to mount. He bounded up behind her, shot long arms around her to grip the reins when Sleeper bogged his ill-shaped head and tried to buck.

"He'll behave, now, Nadine," the outlaw said. "But give me that rifle, and keep a good grip on the reins. This ugly old sinner don't like strangers."

She relinquished the rifle, and Sleeper moved off through the timber, swishing his ratty tail and grunting. The roan was crow-hopping along jerkily, but Long Sam kept digging with dulled rowels, for the dawn was making a pallid swath across the eastern sky, and the outlaw wanted to be well away from the stage station when daylight broke.

"This will do, Nadine," he said finally.

They had ridden down into a deep canyon, where giant oaks spread their branches in a solid canopy. She reined in, slid out of saddle, and jumped hastily away when Sleeper snapped at her with huge, yellow teeth.

Long Sam slid off the roan, and dodged barely in time to avoid an iron-shod hoof that came lashing at him. Sleeper rolled a piggish eye, snorted in disgust over two clean misses, and started drinking from a spring-fed creek.

Long Sam glanced at Nadine Grady uneasily. She was slim and small, with hair the color of strained honey, and big brown eyes. She wore a green silk shirt, sand-colored riding breeches, and bench-made boots of fine leather. Her soft lips were quivering, and there was so much of hurt-

child look in her direct eyes that Long Sam squirmed.

"Look, little lady," he said quietly, "I've been cuffed around and accused of so many crimes I never committed that I'm generally pretty tough-hided. But for you to think I'd steal from you and yore mother sort of gets me, Nadine."

"I was there, Sam, listening," she interrupted. "At the back of the stage station. I was hiding, across the road when the stage driver and some drummer left the stage and went inside with Cole. Ben Chate, the shotgun guard, waited until they were in the station and having coffee, then jumped down, dragged that strong box there off the boot, and ran around the station."

"Yuh followed Ben, Nadine?" Long Sam prompted.

She bit her lip, looked down at the toes of her boots.

"Yes, Sam," she said quietly. "Only I went around on the south side of the building. I was standing there, listening to a mutter of voices. I know that there was a horse there. There you turned around and came straight towards me, and I was so scared I still don't know for sure just what I did or said."

"You think Ben Chate and me are in cahoots, eh?" Long Sam asked.

"You hate Bart Tafflin, and with good reason, Sam!" she said slowly. "Perhaps that's all you thought about when you framed this with Ben."

"That makes me feel better, Nadine, hearin' yuh try to alibi me, anyhow," Long Sam chuckled.

SWIFTLY, he told her exactly what had happened, and was genuinely sorry for her when he saw her tears, and the humiliation in her eyes that begged his forgiveness.

"What I want to know, Nadine," he finished, "is how you happened to be out there, skulkin' around that stage station at any such hour."

"Sam, I do feel terrible for accusing you of stealing that money," Nadine said shakily. "But I'm so upset over everything."

She looked up at him with a timid smile. Long Sam pulled his hat off, finger-combed a mop of thin, yellow hair, and waited while she regained her composure.

"What's this 'everything' that's keeping you upset, Nadine?" he asked finally.

"Bart Tafflin and his sneaking tricks, of course!" she said firmly. "About a year ago, Sam, he talked Mother into letting him start cutting timber up on the north part of our Stirrup range. He made it plain, right from the first, that I was not to go up there, claiming the loggers were such a rough, tough lot that I would be in danger."

"And that was all yuh needed to send yuh snoopin'," Long Sam grinned.

"Of course I snooped!" Nadine said. "And what those timber crews have done to those beautiful forests my father loved so almost broke my heart, Sam. Then I got a look at the books Bart Tafflin keeps at the ranchhouse—the books he shows to Mother, I mean. I knew, Sam, the moment I looked those books over, that Bart Tafflin was robbing my mother!"

"Robbin' his own wife?" Long Sam echoed.

"He certainly is!" Nadine declared. "For every thousand board feet of lumber he enters as sold in those books at the ranch, he sells another thousand he does *not* enter in the books."

"Yuh shore, Nadine?" the outlaw asked gravely.

"I'm positive, Sam!" she cried. "I hired an old fellow who really knows lumber and lumbering, sent him up there to sign on with my stepfather's crews. The reports this man brought back to me positively confirmed my suspicions."

"You've reported this to yore mother?"

"I don't dare, Sam!" the girl said unsteadily. "Mother is terribly ill."

"Good grief, girl, I'm mighty sorry," Long Sam said quickly. "What's the trouble? What do the doctors think?"

"Doctors?" Nadine repeated slowly. "It isn't a case for doctors. My mother is dying of a broken heart. Bart Tafflin is killing her, Sam. Poor mother knows him now for what he is—a big, swaggering, self-centered Yankee carpet-bagger who married her, not because he loved her, but because she was wealthy. If I told her that he is stealing from her, it would just be more than she could bear."

"This pay roll, in that strong box, there," the outlaw asked. "That was to pay them loggers?"

"This would have been the third time, Sam, that the pay roll has been stolen on

the run down from Sundog. The other two times, my stepfather whined until Mother made the money good. He claims he has all his personal capital tied up in equipment needed for the logging."

"But you smelled a mouse about the robberies, eh?" Long Sam asked quickly.

"I certainly did!" Nadine said with emphasis. "Immediately after each of the other two robberies, Bart Tafflin spent a lot of time in Turtle Shoal, flying high with a flashy adventuress named Babs Willoughby. She owns the Peacock Saloon and gambling dive. I suspected that Bart was having Ned Clay, Kip Riddle, Curly Polk or some of the other hoodlums he hires and calls Stirrup cowhands, pull those robberies. Since the stage was robbed before between the way-station Cole Barton runs and Turtle Shoal, I came here this morning, intending to follow the stage out into the brush country."

"Yuh'd have used that rifle, too, if yuh'd follered that stage and caught a bunch stickin' it up." Long Sam frowned. "And the stage *will* be held up. Only I'm dog-goned glad you won't be around there. That derby-wearin' little gent yuh saw ridin' as a passenger is Joe Fry."

"Joe Fry?" Nadine cried. "Sam, do you mean the famous deputy U. S. Marshal?"

"That's whatever, Nadine." The outlaw frowned. "When Bart Tafflin's boys pull that phony holdup, they're in for trouble, unless they happen to catch Joe Fry plumb asleep."

NADINE'S forehead wrinkled in puzzlement.

"But why all the hocus-pocus of having some of the tough Stirrup bunch risk a holdup for nothing more than an empty box, Sam?"

"Ben Chate probably has his guns loaded with blanks." Long Sam shrugged. "Anyhow, he wouldn't try to hit any of the bunch, for he's in cahoots with 'em. But we'd better start wonderin' what to do next, Nadine. Does yore stepdaddy know yuh've been nosin' into his business?"

"I'm not sure," she said nervously. "He's hated me ever since he started trying to get Mother to hand the Stirrup ranch, land, stock, money and all, over to him, right after they were married. Mother told him that Daddy's will gave the place to me, but allowed her full proceeds from it as long as she lived."

"I can imagine how that big carpetbagger faunched when he found out he couldn't get his hands on the Stirrup," Long Sam said grimly.

"Don't tell Uncle Cole Barton about what I've said!" Nadine cried. "He—still loves Mother, Sam."

"Yeah, I know," Long Sam said gravely. "And yuh're right, Nadine. If Cole found out yore mother is sufferin' because of Bart Tafflin's greed, and overbearin' ways, Cole would buckle on a six-shooter and set out to write a powdersmoke prescription that'd cure yore mother, shore enough." He added grimly, "Somebody'll have to write that prescription, and before it's too late."

"Sam, couldn't we follow that stage?" Nadine asked.

"If that pesky Joe Fry wasn't on the stage, I'd foller it, and deal that bunch a surprise." Long Sam scowled. "But I don't want any tanglement with that derby-wearin' little squirt."

"Stop trying to pretend I'm a child, Sam," Nadine said peevishly. "You call me youngster, yet there's no long, white beard dangling from your chin. And don't try to pretend that you're not puzzled over that business of the strong boxes being switched, either."

"Dog-goned if yuh haven't grown up a lot in the past five years, Nadine." Long Sam grinned.

She grinned back at him. "I was eighteen when you quit visiting the Stirrup. I'm twenty-three now, and you're perhaps ten years my senior, if that much. So stop trying to brush me aside as just small fry who got in your way."

"In other words, yuh don't aim to go home as I want yuh to, do yuh?" Long Sam asked uneasily.

"I don't, Sam, so stop looking like a thundercloud." Nadine laughed. "I like your notion of someone writing a powdersmoke prescription to cure my mother, and I've an idea who will do the writing. So I'm staying with you, even if I'm not welcome."

"I've got no time to argue, so let's go," Long Sam grumbled. "Only yuh'll have to ride behind me, this time. We're goin' up to the station to see Cole and give him this strong box, and old Sleeper will trav-

el better if he knows I have hold of the reins."

They mounted, moved up the canyon, then across the heavily timbered flats at a good clip. The outlaw was looking down at the metal strong box, eyes moody, as they approached the stage station. He would have ridden on into the clearing, unaware of danger, if Nadine had not called out sharply.

"Sam, wait!"

He felt her grab his shoulders as he hauled in on the reins.

"Judas!" he grumbled "Cole has company, and I blamed near stumbled right out into the open."

There were three saddled horses standing behind the stage station, and Long Sam's eyes narrowed when he noted the horses were sweat-drenched from recent hard travel.

"That big black gelding with the fancy saddle is Bart Tafflin's favorite mount!" Nadine said tensely. "The chunky buckskin is Ned Clay's best roping horse, and that gray belongs to Kip Riddle. Sam, what shall we do?"

"Easy!" the outlaw said sharply, and rode off at a fast trot, heading for a thick stand of fuzzy young pines at the edge of the clearing.

"I hope they didn't sight us, Sam," Nadine said shakily as they halted in the thicket.

"If they had, there'd have been some fuss raised," the outlaw said. "Hop down, Nadine."

LONG SAM tossed split reins over Sleeper's head, then swung out of saddle and lifted the strong box from the saddle-horn, balancing it on his shoulder.

"I'm scared, Sam!" Nadine said. "Bart Tafflin hates Uncle Cole, and wouldn't be here on a friendly call."

"Uh-huh, I figger it that way, too," Long Sam droned. "You stick here. No matter what yuh see, hear or *think*, stay in this thicket till I call yuh, or Cole Barton calls yuh. Understand?"

"Don't worry!" Nadine shuddered. "If Bart Tafflin saw me, he might take his quirt to me, as he threatened to do if he ever caught me around Uncle Cole. But what are you going to do, Sam?"

"Me? Why, turn this box over to Cole Barton, of course."

"But you can't do it now!" Nadine cried. "If you go up there, carrying that box, Bart and his men will make trouble for you!"

"Let me worry about that," the gaunt outlaw said gravely.

Long Sam turned before she could argue further, boring through the thicket to the edge of the clearing. He steadied the strong box on his shoulder with his left hand, and kept his supple right hand close to the black butt of the six-shooter on his thigh as he went out across the clearing at a rapid walk, eyes coldly alert.

Nothing moved around the stage station, and even the three weary horses paid him no attention as he skirted past them, then moved to the door of a lean-to that served as a kitchen. He waited there a moment, head cocked to one side, holding his breath as he listened. Hearing nothing, he gently eased the kitchen door open, stepped inside where the odors of recently cooked food and coffee assailed his nostrils. He heard voices, muffled and indistinct, coming from the main log building, beyond the lean-to.

Long Sam crossed the kitchen to a plank door, put the strong box down to the floor against the wall, and pulled the door open a cautious crack. His narrowed eyes grew cold and hard, and suddenly a range dirge hummed softly from the flaring nostrils of his long, thin nose. And anyone who knew Long Sam Littlejohn even passably well would have realized that the softly hummed dirge meant that he was suddenly fighting mad!

Out there in the long room that served as combination depot and lunch room, lanky Cole Barton was backed against the log wall, his hair disheveled, his face white and twisted with pain and anger that made his steady dark eyes too bright. Barton's left arm hung limply at his side, and the shirt sleeve was bloody from shoulder to cuff.

Standing before Cole Barton, with death in their hot eyes, were Bart Tafflin, Ned Clay, and Kip Riddle.

"I'll give you one more chance, Cole," Bart Tafflin said slowly. "Like we've told you, the stage was held up a couple of miles below here just at daylight this mornin'. Ben Chate, the guard, was killed by three bandits. The teams spooked and upset the stage. The three bandits grabbed

the strong box and hightailed. Kip, Ned and me, on our way up from Turtle Shoal to ride gun-guard on that stage the rest of the way to town, heard the shootin' and got there fast as we could."

"And yuh claim yuh trailed them three bandits up here, and that yuh saw the strong box busted open and emptied at my woodpile!' Cole Barton said coldly. "Yuh say yuh pressed on, tryin' to pick up the sign of them bandits, but couldn t find where they had rode away from here. And yuh also claim, Bart, that the busted strong box yuh say yuh seen at my woodpile was missin' when you three give up the chase and rode back here!"

"That's right!" Bart Tafflin snapped. "You aimin' to give that story the lie when Ike Nolan gets back up here with Sheriff Lon Varney?"

Tafflin was a burly man, thick-shouldered and powerfully built. He had jet-black eyes and hair, and a flat-cheeked face that was as cold and hard as a slab of granite.

"I don't know what to make of yore tale, Tafflin!" Cole Barton said flatly. "But I do know yuh tried to kill me when I heard you three millin' around outside and stepped to the kitchen door to see who was out there."

"Twist another slug into him, Bart!" Ned Clay said coldly.

Ned Clay was a stocky man who ramrodded the vast Stirrup outfit for Bart Tafflin. Clay's hair was the color of sand, and eyes that were so pale blue they looked white squinted past a brawl-battered nose that centered a round, vicious face that was as red as skinned beef.

"Ned's right, Bart," Kip Riddle spoke up. "Somethin' has gone wrong. We better play it safe."

RIDDLE was a lizard-thin, hatchet-faced tough, with buck teeth and shifty brown eyes. Sizing him up, Long Sam Littlejohn knew that Kip Riddle, with his high-keyed nerves and sharp, twitching eyes would be a deadly man to face in a gun-ruckus.

But Long Sam was not too much concerned over the gun-slinging abilities of Bart Tafflin and those two Stirrup toughs. The outlaw was grimly realizing that he now had an answer to that hocus-pocus of the strong boxes being switched.

He glanced down at the box beside his dusty boots, a mirthless grin touching the corners of his wide mouth. Curly Polk was supposed to have opened the strong box the moment he received it, to have lifted the pay roll out of it, then left the box. Tafflin, Long Sam knew now, had meant to frame Cole Barton!

"Bart, listen!" Ned Clay yelped suddenly. "There's somebody else around here. I hear hummin'! We better—" Clay's voice ended on a hoarse gulp.

Realizing that he had unconsciously let the dismal tune he was humming grow louder, Long Sam flipped the door open, stood there looking out across the room into four astonished faces.

"Easy, men!" Tafflin bleated. "That's Long Sam Littlejohn."

"Howdy, Tafflin," Long John drawled. "Ned, you and Kip better get your hands off them guns. Or do yuh want me to take this strong box with the pay roll money in it and just sift on about my own business?"

Long Sam's left hand groped down inside the kitchen door, then came up, holding the strong box. He tossed it out into the floor, and the bang and clatter made Bart Tafflin and his two hirelings jump as if a gun had gone off.

"Sam, where in the name of time did yuh get that?" Cole Barton's voice croaked.

Long Sam explained, fully, how he had come by the strong box, watching fear and fury twist the faces of Bart Tafflin and his two men. Cole Barton began grinning, despite the pain in his wounded shoulder.

"Curly Polk, one of yore own men, Tafflin!" Barton laughed jarringly. "How do yuh like that for a surprise?"

"It wouldn't be a surprise to Tafflin to know that Curly was here to get this strong box," Long Sam said flatly. "Tafflin sent him here for that. Curly was supposed to take the money, Cole, and leave the box here, so's you'd be accused of helpin' rob the stage."

"You bounty-plastered fool, who'd believe anything you said?" Bart Tafflin growled hoarsely.

"I shore believe him, Tafflin!" Cole Barton said hotly. "No wonder yuh tried to blast me down when I opened the door!"

"Ned, you and Kip take it easy!" Tafflin grinned suddenly. "All we've got to

do is let the sheriff get up here, and take over. With Long Sam Ltitlejohn fetchin' that stage loot back here, it's a cinch the sheriff will figger him and Cole and some other feller robbed the stage, and that Littlejohn waltzed back here with the loot, aimin' to split with Cole."

"Yeah, shore!" Kip Riddle laughed. "All we got to do is let Sheriff Varney gather these two up, loot and all."

"Think yuh can get out from under that easy?" Long Sam asked drily.

Tafflin grinned crookedly. "When me and my two boys showed up at the wrecked stage, the driver and some blasted dude he called Shorty Smith were strippin' harness off a couple of the stage horses, aimin' to ride to Turtle Shoal for the sheriff and a posse. Stick around, if you're fool enough, Littlejohn, until they get here."

"For a dude, that Shorty Smith gent was doin' some mighty loud hollerin'!" Kip Riddle laughed. "When the stage upset he got his right shoulder dislocated, and the way he was faunchin' about his gun arm gettin' put out of commission, a man would think he was a ring-tailed powder-merchant."

Long Sam glanced at Cole Barton, who looked sick and shaky. His holster was empty, and Long Sam knew he could expect no help from him in a gun ruckus.

"Did yuh know that gent Shorty Smith, Cole?" Long Sam asked.

"No," Barton declared. "But I've got a feelin' he's a pretty tough customer, Sam."

"Just keep talkin' until the posse gets here, and your neck will be in a noose for sure," Bart Tafflin snorted.

"Tafflin," Long Sam said grimly, "you and Ned Clay and Kip Riddle robbed that stage this mornin', just as yuh've robbed it of yore own pay roll twice before. Ben Chate was in on the deal, all three times. But yuh beefed Chate this mornin'. Likely yuh figgered this was the last time yuh'd dare steal yore own pay roll, and had sense enough to know Ben would bleed yuh for plenty. On top of that, you wanted Barton jailed for life, or hung. So yuh killed Ben when you three held up the stage and took that empty strong box'"

LONG SAM had walked a couple of paces out into the room and there was a cold, bright glitter in his smoky eyes as he watched the three toughs before him. Their cockiness was gone now, and they were inching hands towards gun butts, faces pale and tense.

"Boss, this long-legged hellion has got—" Ned Clay began hoarsely, but broke off when Bart Tafflin cursed him hotly.

"Keep your lip buttoned, you fool!" Tafflin growled. "That goes for you, too, Kip. This long-shanked hunk of noose bait is tryin' to stampede us, that's all. His word ain't worth a plugged peso with the law that has put a bounty on his hide."

"Bart's right, Ned," Kip Riddle gulped. "Nobody'll listen to Littlejohn, that's a cinch."

"I ought to let you three go ahead dependin' on that," Long Sam grunted. "But I'm sort of behind on my travelin', and haven't got time to waste."

"If you want to catch up on yore travelin', go right ahead!" Bart Tafflin sneered.

"I don't aim to let anything detain me long," the outlaw said. "You see, Tafflin', that derby-hatted, cigar-chewin' gent on the stage who called his self Shorty Smith was Joe Fry."

"What's that?" Ned Clay yelped.

"He's spinnin' a windy, that's all!" Kip Riddle snorted. "Such a famous deputy U. S. Marshal as Joe Fry wouldn't run around lookin' like no cussed dude."

"Ned, you and Kip come on!" Bart Tafflin croaked. "We're gettin' out of here. I've heard how Joe Fry is generally mistook for a drummer or a business man by fellers who don't know him."

"Stand hitched!" Long Sam ordered coldly. "That gent was Joe Fry, shore thing. But you three ain't runnin' no place, so don't try it."

"What are you stickin' your nose into our business for, Littlejohn?" Tafflin asked harshly.

"Yuh're about the lowest, slimiest thing that ever crawled the face of the earth, Tafflin!" Long Sam rasped. "Nadine is outside, yonder. She knows yuh've been stealin' her mother blind on that timber deal. Nadine seen Ben Chate and Curly Polk swap strong boxes at the back of this buildin'. She knows yuh stole them other two pay rolls, then whined around her mother until her mother handed over money to pay yore timber crews. A man

who'd pull stuff like that—"

Long Sam's tirade ended abruptly when Cole Barton yelled and lunged at Tafflin. Tafflin twisted half around, threw a fist into the wounded man's face that knocked him tumbling. But in that second of excitement, Kip Riddle's hands swooped down, and he was grinning savagely as he tip-tilted open-ended holsters that were slung on swivels, and blasted a pair of slugs at Long Sam.

But Long Sam Littlejohn had seen that coming. He slashed his own hands down, jumping aside as he saw Kip Riddle's hands grab and tilt the guns. The outlaw flinched instinctively when one of Riddle's bullets ripped through the slack in his shirt. Then Littlejohn's own guns were in his palms, and the mournful dirge was coming through his bared teeth as the six-shooters bucked and roared.

"Gun him, Ned!" Tafflin's deep voice boomed. "Nail the son!"

Long Sam saw Riddle spin and buckle, and was swiveling around on the balls of his feet, smoking guns hunting a new target, when a bullet burned across his left cheek, causing him to lurch so sharply he missed Tafflin's big hulk. Then another bullet raked the hat off the outlaw's yellow thatch, and he saw Ned Clay jumping at him, chopping down for a close-range, sure-thing shot. Long Sam's guns belched flame that seemed to reach out, wipe across Clay's raw face with such force that he was thrown over backwards.

"Blast him, Sam!" Cole Barton's voice moaned groggily. "Don't let Tafflin get away!"

Tafflin was scuttling for the door, putting all the power of his thick legs into getting outside. Long Sam's guns bucked, and Tafflin came down, howling in fury. A bulet had torn the heel off one of his boots, and Tafflin flopped around, his rage-twisted face white as he lined up his gun. Long Sam dropped spiked hammers of both his guns, and Tafflin's bullet plucked at his left shoulder.

BUT Tafflin would not bend killer fingers around gun trigger again. He lay face down, and what had been the base of his skull made Cole Barton gulp and turn hastily away.

"Tally all," Long Sam droned, and began reloading his hot guns.

"Sam is it true?" Cole Barton panted. "Was Tafflin stealin' from Joyce? Did he hold up the stage this mornin', and the other two times besides? And was that dude really Joe Fry?"

"Whoa, Cole!" Long Sam cut in sharply. "I've got to get out of here, for that dude *was* Joe Fry, and he'll be along. Just tell Sheriff Varney what yuh heard me say to Tafflin and these other two, and tell Lon I said to grab that big spur-jinglin' Curly Polk tough, before Curly quits the country. *Adios, amigo.* It'll be some time before I dare drift in for another visit, for with Fry around here I'll have to wet my back gettin' to Mexico. But when I do come back, Cole, if yuh've let some other fast-talkin' galoot beat yore time with Joyce, so help me, I'll cripple yuh!"

"Don't worry Sam, about me bein' so blamed slow with Joyce, after this." Cole Barton grinned wryly.

"That's the ticket," Long Sam said. "And Nadine will help you. She's out yonder in a thicket, probably scared half to death by all this shootin'. I'll send her scamperin' home, for there's no point in her gettin' mixed up in the stir that'll start when the sheriff gets here. But if I was you, I'd drop over to Stirrup before too long. Nadine is shore to see that yuh're signed back on as foreman, and if yuh can't paddle yore own canoe after that, yuh ought to swap your saddle hoss for a sheep hook and take to the hills!"

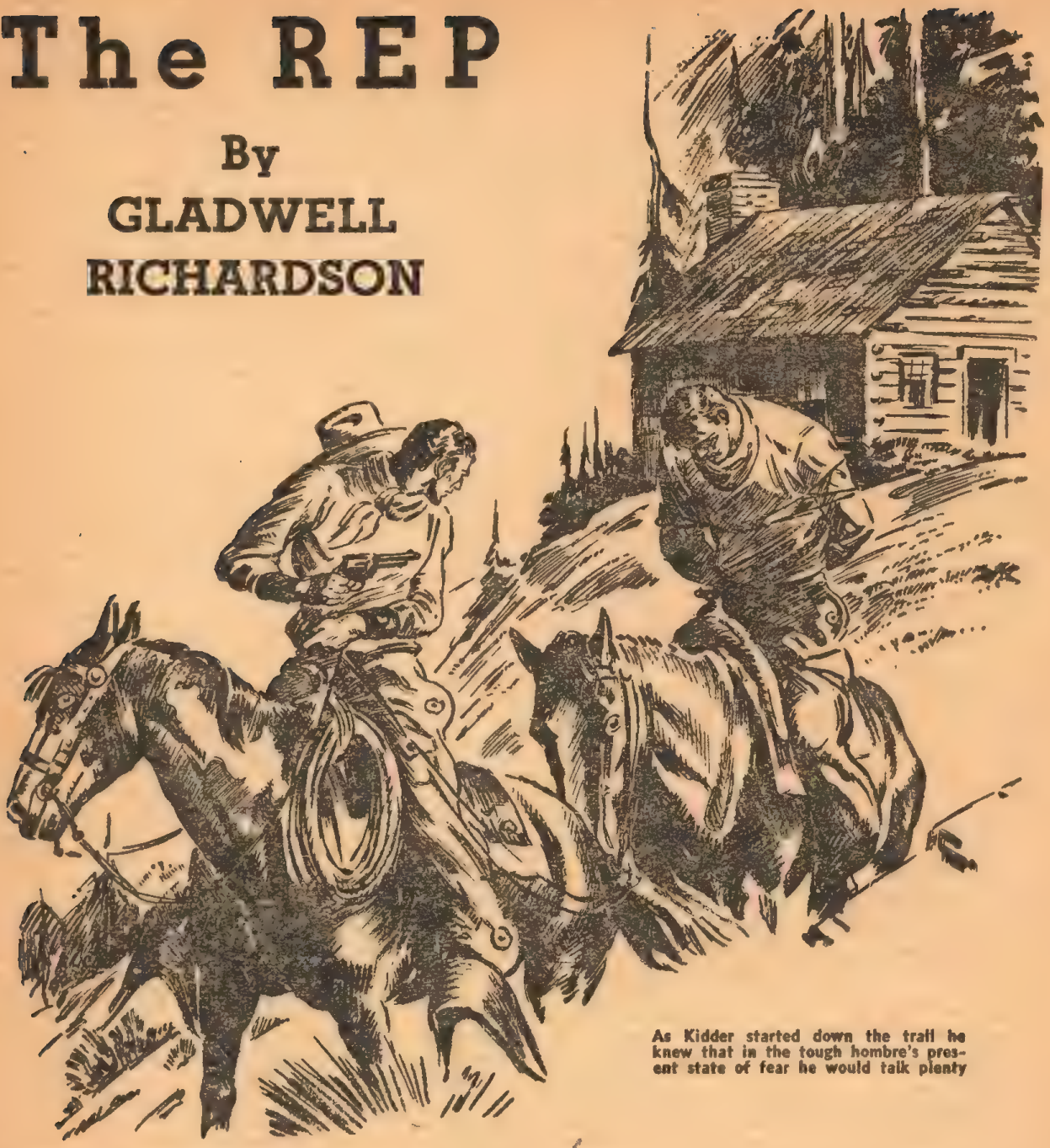
COMING NEXT ISSUE

LONG SAM BORROWS A BADGE

Another Exciting Story by LEE BOND

The REP

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON



As Kidder started down the trail he knew that in the tough hombre's present state of fear he would talk plenty

WHEN Roy Kidder rode up to the frame ranchhouse he was surprised to see six men on the porch. It was roundup time on the Bullhead ranges, and this Scissors crew obviously had knocked off work temporarily. Kidder had come here off the Texas trail because he expected to visit Vern Hobbs, a former saddle partner on the LIT.

Kidder released the rope of the pack horse on which his bedding and gear were loaded, meeting only curiosity. The Scissors men studied him and he looked them over. A man who obviously was the foreman lifted his head toward a bulky cowman whose chair leaned against the wall.

"Mebbe this is the answer to our problem, Mr. Toms," he drawled.

Roy Kidder Takes the Trail of His Pard's Killer!

None of the men was Vern Hobbs, of course, and Roy Kidder was prepared to ask his whereabouts when the cowman spoke.

"Since yuh're ridin a LIT hoss, likely yuh're lookin' for a job bein' so far from home over here in New Mexico?"

"Some such idea in mind," Kidder answered.

"Well, yuh don't need to hunt no further. We're short-handed since my rep got killed over to the Walkin' A roundup.

"Killed?" A slow dread grew in Kidder. Hobbs' absence took on terrible meaning.

"Yeah," the cowman replied. "Vern was repping for the Scissors. He left camp last night sayin' he'd pick up a change of clothes, bein' so near home. The cook found his empty saddle at the corral this mornin'. So we come in to find Vern Hobbs shot dead on the trail between here and the roundup camp."

Roy Kidder was stunned for the moment, then his trigger mind began working. Forty-dollar-a-month cowboys just didn't get shot down for no reason at all. Kidder sensed danger, and was glad now he hadn't identified himself immediately with Vern Hobbs. He would take the job here and find out why Vern had been killed.

"Yuh got the killer?" he asked.

The cowman, who said he was Ira Toms, owner of the Scissors, told Kidder that the sheriff from Pepper had located tracks only to lose them.

The law, as well as the Scissors men, was at a loss to understand why Hobbs was shot.

"He was reppin' at the Walking A calf roundup?" Kidder said slowly. "The Scissors an' them get along all right?" The reason for the killing could have originated in that camp.

Toms shook his head sadly.

"Always, so far. Us and Al Cully get along fine."

"Thanks for the job," Roy Kidder said.

HE SWUNG out of saddle, went over to the porch where he casually made a cigarette while Toms talked on.

"Yuh represented for other outfits before?" the rancher asked, and added at the cowboy's nod, "I figgered so, since yuh've got LIT stock. You'll know what to do."

He gave instructions on how to reach the roundup camp and said he was relieved that Kidder had come along, since he was in a hurry to get his own roundup started again in the morning. When Kidder gave the rancher his name he watched the cowman. Vern Hobbs might have mentioned him. But Toms wrote it down without interest.

Roy Kidder took off at once, riding for most of the way on the same trail where Hobbs had been bushwhacked. But he reasoned the secret of Vern's death was not on the trail, but in the Walking A camp.

It was dusk when he reached the camp, which was surrounded with dust, and noisy with the bawl of cattle held under herd. He met the foreman, weazened and taciturn Sol Beck, and that night came in contact with Cully, the Walking A owner.

All the neighboring outfits had representatives with the roundup except Savage of the Bar CC. Having started his own early, he had finished and joined Cully just because he liked the work.

On the Bullhead ranges the reps worked with the regular crew. No stuff was cut out and taken home, that being done in the fall. Here they simply ran the iron of the man owning the cow with a calf, noted it in the tally book and reported the number to the rep.

Beck assigned a circle to Kidder the morning after his arrival. For ten straight days he saw nothing crooked going on. Listening to the various crews talking he learned no more about Vern Hobbs' death than he already knew.

Near noon one day he came around a rocky canyon instead of driving a dozen head of cows with calves through it. This threw him into the edge of country worked at the previous camp. He found a Scissors cow with a freshly branded Walking A calf.

Most cowmen did not consider it stealing to make up a part of their range loss by running their own brand on a few of their neighbors' calves. But sometimes they overdid it. Kidder remembered now that Beck always had been careful to give the visiting reps work inside the area to be covered rather than on the

edge, where they might find something.

Reaching the held herd, Kidder threw in his finds and rode over to the chuck-wagon. Half a mile away dust billowed up where the branding was going on. Finishing his food, he rode over to where the branding fires burned and sweat-stained men wielded irons as fast as a calf was roped.

He dismounted, walking up to the scene. The genial Savage of the Bar CC was looking on.

Cully stood to one side of the tally book man.

Roy Kidder saw a roper pull a calf away from a Scissors cow. As the branding man came over the roper sang out, "Walkin' A!" The same was repeated by the brander, and echoed by the tally book man. The brander applied that iron. Most of the work here was running Cully's brand on the squalling calves.

The brander lifted away, and the head-holder reached for the rope around the calf's neck.

"Hold that one!" Kidder called loudly.

He might as well have shouted, "Thief! Thief!" For that was what it meant coming from a rep. He stood still in the sudden, shocked silence, both hands hooked over his cartridge belt, watching Cully and Beck who came up to face him.

Cully's thin lips quirked. The man was big, domineering, and from the first Kidder had decided he and Beck would be dangerous men to monkey with.

"Yuh question that calf?" Cully said, a warning purr in his voice.

"Turn it loose," Roy Kidder said, on the alert.

Savage, an honest cowman, was at first only surprised, but when the released calf darted straight to the Scissors cow his expression was one of wonder.

Cully cursed, glaring at the roper.

"What did yuh call that calf?"

The rider hesitated a shade too long. "A Scissors," he said then. "Can't them people hear no more?"

The tally book man's lips started to form, "Scissors," when Cully, obviously aware that Savage heard correctly, broke out again.

"He said Walkin' A! Oh, well, in a rush like this with so many brands a mistake like that is easy made." He glanced in Kidder's direction. "We'll brand the next good-sized Walkin' A with the Scissors."

"What about all them other Walkin' A calves with Scissors cows?" Roy Kidder asked bluntly. "Or do they just like their milk better?"

BECK'S body went stiff as a rod while the others gaped in astonishment. Beck's hand slapped to the handle of his gun, but he paused to glance at Cully for instructions. Cully's face was beet-red, his eyes narrowed to slits. Kidder kept his blue eyes fixed on both men to catch any sudden motion of either. He expected both to try gunning him. Anywhere in cattleland the accusation he had made meant a fight, and Cully looked to be a man who would stop at little to gain his ends.

Yet for some reason he hesitated. Maybe the presence of Savage, an influential cowman, had something to do with it. None of the reps of the other outfits were near—just the Walking A crew.

"Savage," Kidder said swiftly, "the answer to why Vern Hobbs was killed is here in what you just saw. He didn't think they'd caught onto him finding out they branded wrong calves, made the excuse of going home for clean clothes so he could tell Ira Toms. One of this pair got him."

"That's a lie!" Cully roared.

"I've called you and yore foreman," Kidder told him. "Go ahead and get yore smokepoles out. Both of you skunks won't be enough pay for Vern's death, but I'll be satisfied."

"So that's yore angle?" Cully snorted. "Yuh was a pard of Hobbs, and blame us with him gettin' killed. That's the reason yuh pull any excuse to kill somebody!"

"I'm waitin' for yuh to draw," Kidder replied coldly. "Scared, Cully, even backed by your foreman? Scared because yuh're guilty!"

"I won't take that!" Beck shouted furiously. "Al, gun him!"

"Hold it, Sol!" Cully yelled. "Can't yuh see this feller is a hired killer and is only huntin' any excuse to fight?"

Cully got the accusation out in time to halt Beck's draw. Obviously Cully didn't want a gun battle.

"You get!" he said to Kidder. "Go

report whatever yuh want to Toms. Tell him from me to send another rep, or come himself."

Cully turned his back, ordering the crew to return to work. When Beck moved off, muttering darkly, Kidder went to take his Scissors saddle horse and other stock from the remuda. He saddled and packed on his gear at the wagon.

Judging from the activity around the branding fires nothing unusual seemed to have occurred at all. Beck and Cully were in sight and Savage was standing glumly by himself when Roy Kidder left the camp, heading for the trail to the Scissors.

It bothered him that Cully and Beck had failed to shoot. For there was little doubt now about all those misbranded Scissors calves. A simple check would show it, would prove Cully a thief. How far would Cully go to protect himself? All the way, Kidder believed, whether Savage was around or not. This was why when he approached the flat topped knoll and the stand of timber where Vern Hobbs had been slain he hesitated.

On a hunch Kidder went around the east side of the knoll, and stopped his horses there. Climbing off, he went up over the knoll fast. He had to make it fast for if skulkers awaited him they undoubtedly had already spotted him.

As he crouched behind a screen of brush, he felt his pulse leap. It had been some time since he had left the roundup camp and now below, in the slanting sunlight of the last of the day, he saw two saddled horses on the far side of the trail. Watching closely, he finally picked up Cully on the near side of the knoll, standing behind a pinnacle of rock watching the trail. Across from him was Beck, also hidden from view on the lower trail.

The distance was overlong, and Kidder didn't have too good a sight through the timber, yet he leveled his six-gun carefully, taking aim before squeezing the trigger. The crash echoed through the timber. Cully leaped and ran. Kidder did not see Beck's flight at all, concentrating on trying to get another shot at Cully. No such chance. However he remained where he was, watching. Their horses had shied aside into the timber at the shot.

When Roy Kidder saw them next in the dying day, Cully and Beck were definitely on the run for their camp. Returning to his horses, Kidder went on to the Scissors ranch. Only the cook, a stove-up former cowboy with a badly set broken leg, was there. Kidder cared for his horses, then went to the kitchen to eat. The cook was loquacious and, having been alone for days, talked a blue streak. Kidder asked about the Scissors roundup.

According to the cook the wagon should be that night on Mussel Creek, deep in the southwest near Walking A range. They would finish the calf crop there in the next few days.

Since Kidder wanted to inform Toms of the facts that night, he resaddled his horse and rode to Mussel Creek. He found the camp asleep, left his horse in the willows on the creek near where the remuda was held, and woke up Toms.

THEIR talk aroused others, who piled wood on the cook fire and filled the coffee pot. Toms, joined by his foreman who wanted to hear the story, remained quiet a long time after Roy finished telling about the branding of Scissors calves with the Walking A iron.

"No doubt about it?" Toms asked finally.

"None whatever. Savage will bear me out. This is what Vern Hobbs discovered and tried to get away to tell you. They killed him just like they tried to bushwhack me on the trail."

"Well, I'm surprised in some ways. Figgered last year we didn't get our share off the Walkin' A. This unfenced range lets critters stray all over creation. This year we find plenty of Scissors cows gone. They must be on the Walkin' A. I'm a mite put out with Al Cully."

"Just give him a little time and yuh'll lose plenty," Roy warned. "I expect this minute he's sendin' men to hide out most of yore stuff. If yuh find only a few he'll put it down as honest mistakes, and that would get by."

"We'll go down there in the mornin'," Toms decided. "He can't move fast enough to prevent a check."

"Listen!" the foreman called, getting to his feet.

A rider was coming on the gallop. He came in sight in the starlight, approached

the flickering fire, and swung out of the saddle—a tall man, wearing a big gun and sporting a "Texas mustache."

"The sheriff!" Toms exclaimed. "Now, what brings him?"

"Hi, Ira!" the sheriff said, moving toward him. "That cowboy beside yuh the one been reppin' with the Walkin' A?"

"Yeah, and are we glad to see you! Yuh can go along with us tomorrow to check up on Al Cully's crooked doin's."

"Funny, you sayin' that, since Al sent a rider killin' a hoss into town to tell me this rep of yores shot and killed Savage of the Bar CC this afternoon in an argument over a calf!"

"What?" Toms exploded, and the roundup crew stood stunned. Savage had been one of the best liked cowmen in the country.

Savage must have shown his own suspicion and they had been forced to kill again. Roy Kidder instantly realized Cully's play. To discredit him, the Scissors rep, they would charge him with the killing of Savage, and meanwhile, with the range riled up, Cully had plenty of time to save himself.

"Hold it, you!" the sheriff ordered, reaching for his gun.

He was not quite quick enough. Roy Kidder drew as he whirled, sending one bullet to halt the sheriff's draw, not to harm him. The surprised sheriff got tangled up as he jumped, and fell. Kidder hit the saddle, plunged into the creek and across, hearing the roar of sound in the startled camp. There was no pursuit.

Bitterness rode south with him. Cully worked fast, and Kidder figured he hadn't a gnat's chance against the whole country aroused over Savage's death. He wouldn't be expected to head for the Walking A camp, so in that direction he took his one chance—one to exact justice or be killed before he fled the country.

He didn't know what time it was when he reached the Walking A camp. Nor did he care. Leaving his horse back from the wagon, he went forward in a crouch, seeking Cully or Beck. Both usually unrolled their beds a few yards from the end of the wagon.

A cowboy raised up in his blanket right before him. He stared through the moonlight an instant before yelling his recognition in a shriek that brought the entire bedground awake. At the same time the cowboy reached under his clothes for a gun.

This bad luck staggered Roy Kidder, though it didn't keep him from acting. He struck the cowboy with his right boot, knocking the gun out of his hand. Wheeling, he ran a few yards, heard a bullet whistle by before the crack of the gun, and turned to throw some lead in the general direction of the wagon to drive the crew to cover.

He ran on to his horse. Once in saddle he only drew off from the camp, considering the situation. Activity continued down there and within a few minutes a body of riders plunged away from it, circled, and came back.

One of them spotted Kidder in the starlight and raised a cry. At once the cavalcade spread out to give chase. Kidder would have handled a few men, but this bunch was too many for a single man. He lined out for the dark mass of timbered hills marking the border of Walking A range.

His horse skimmed across the flats, took the rolling land with speed, too. Yet the pursuing riders seemed to be able to maintain their distance. Until the predawn clouds obscured the morning. By then Roy Kidder had reached the hills. The pursuit was halted temporarily at least. On the crest of a hill overlooking the range below he dismounted and took up a position from which he could watch.

DAWN came on, turning from silver to yellow, and then came the day. Out in the distance he saw a band of riders returning to the Walking A camp slowly. He viewed them in some disappointment. They had quit, and he had failed to cut out his men. Rising, he started to leave.

Movement below brought him to a sudden stop, however. Up over a dry wash bank appeared two riders. Cully and Beck together. Doubtless they had decided to make it their personal business to overhaul the Scissors rep. Kidder grinned faintly, observing their movements. Theorizing that he was miles ahead, they were now following ground sign. A smart trick, but it could work two ways.

Alive with renewed vigor, Roy Kidder mounted, swinging off unhurriedly up through the timber. Where the pines began he turned north, coming presently to an old trail. He would let them come to him, but in a spot to suit his own plans. Taking the trail, he wound up onto a bench to discover a log cabin in a heavy stand of timber. It was a Walking A winter line camp. He sat his saddle in a windfall surrounded by heavy timber, brush and fallen logs.

Behind the cabin was another bench, the whole area clogged thick with brush and great hunks of granite. He had it then, and leaped out of his saddle, running on through the windfall to make heavy tracks. Pausing only slightly before the cabin door he turned to the left. Past it he headed into the brush up a sloping side. Where rocks began he slowed down, eyeing the men who were hunting him, while the whole possibility of the moves he could make became clear in his mind.

Stepping to a low rock he turned aside, leaving a pointing trail to disappear while he disguised his real course back to the upper end of the cabin. While moving across into the timber over the trail the clash of iron shod hoofs on stone warned him of close approach of danger. On the upper side of the windfall he lay down behind a worm-eaten log.

Cully and Beck rode into the windfall, exclaiming briefly as they saw his horse.

"We got him!" Cully exulted.

They went quiet then. Saddle leather creaked, and Kidder could see the movement of their legs through the rushes and timber. They moved on, right out before him, facing the doorless cabin.

While they stood whispering, eyeing it, Roy Kidder could have gunned them. But ambush did not appeal to him. Now, too, a part of his plan was to take at least one of them alive if he could, and make it impossible for Cully to have time to cover up on the range. One of them facing a long prison sentence might open lips.

"Try his tracks," Cully said.

He stood before the cabin while Beck moved, eyes darting ahead against sudden attack. The Walking A foreman moved clear of the cabin end to the edge of the brush where he halted, to make signs with his hands.

"Mebbe he's up there, and mebbe he ain't," Cully called guardedly. "Go see while I watch out here that he don't try for the hosses."

Brush crackled as Beck forced his way through. Cully moved around, examining the ground a while, finally going over in front of the cabin door. Once more he considered it suspiciously. Perhaps he thought maybe Roy Kidder was in there after all. Yet he did not barge in.

Kidder could not jump him yet. A shot would warn Beck, leave him a dangerous skulker in the brush. Nor must Cully be permitted time to make an outcry.

An idea occurred and Kidder crawled through into the windfall where he took the rope from his saddle. He went back, slipping from tree to tree. Meanwhile Cully decided to go around behind the cabin. But once more he returned to the front, apparently again considering the advisability of entering.

Roy Kidder quit the protecting pine tree. He moved into the open, and across eight feet snaked a small noose over Cully's head. Before the man could cry out in alarm, with his hands going up, the Scissors rep jerked the noose tight, and threw Cully hard at the same time. He followed up quickly. But Cully, with his breath cut off and badly dazed by the fall, lay helpless.

There was need for fast work. Beck would soon be returning. Picking up Cully, Roy carried him into the cabin. Some color returned to Cully's face when the noose was loosened. Knowing he had little time left, Kidder looked around frantically. Little in the way of thongs ready to hand.

He noticed the pole overhead, coming from the lower end toward the front on a rising slant. It would hold Cully's weight. Almost the instant the idea came he lifted Cully's body, tied the rope to one wrist and threw it over the low pole, fastening the other to it. The man's neck bandanna was passed through his mouth as a gag, for he showed signs of regaining consciousness. He still sagged on the pole, however, but could move his booted feet.

CATCHING hold of the man's body, Kidder shoved the bound wrists

over the pole, lifting until Cully swung with his feet off the floor. Kidder took away the cowman's holstered gun, and darted through the door to the stand of timber before it. He laid Cully's weapon aside, eyeing the brush high over the cabin.

Beck came around the lower end of the cabin, gun out, and alert until he gained a position back from one side of the door. His body jerked suddenly and a wild cry came from his throat.

Roy Kidder realized then that from the way Cully's body was suspended, it resembled that of a hanging man.

What astonished Kidder, however, was the way Beck broke all apart. The man was blubbering, crying and gasping.

"Al! How'd he do it? Al—hangin' there!" He kept on babbling, completely out of his mind.

It seemed unbelievable. Not understanding the fear that the sight of Cully swinging had created in Beck, he went out and took him without a struggle. Indeed, until he got the foreman down to the horses, Beck hardly seemed aware of what had happened to him.

"Don't hang me!" he pleaded suddenly, coming out of the worst of his agitation. He kept it up, blubbering and talking.

Kidder had thrown Beck's gun away, and now that he realized what was the man's one fear he elected to play upon it. There were no ropes on either his or Cully's saddle. They had been left on the branding ground where many were needed constantly.

"Reckon we'll have to take yuh to where I can get another rope," he told Beck, and made him get into his saddle.

"I'll tell yuh all I know!" Beck cried. "I didn't kill Hobbs. Al done it—and you done hanged him!"

"Come on!" Kidder ordered as he finished tying him in the saddle with piggin' strings. "Yuh was just as guilty, bein' with him."

"I tell you, Al shot him, not me!"

Determinedly, Roy Kidder mounted, caught the bridle reins of Beck's horse to start down the trail. In his present state of fear Beck, the tough, hardened killer, was going to talk plenty. All Kidder needed to do was get him where the right people could hear him.

[*Turn page*]

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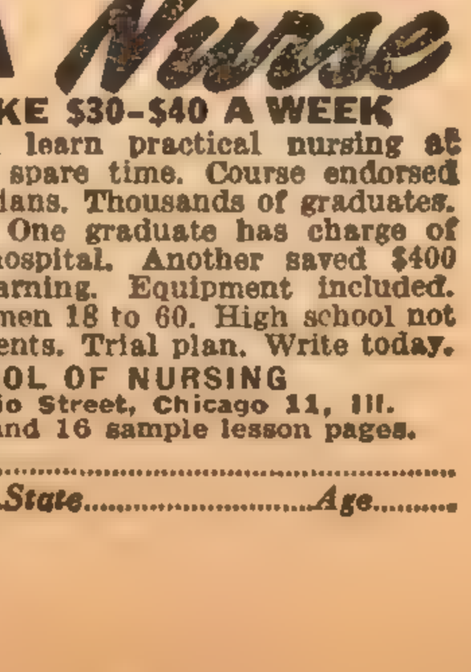

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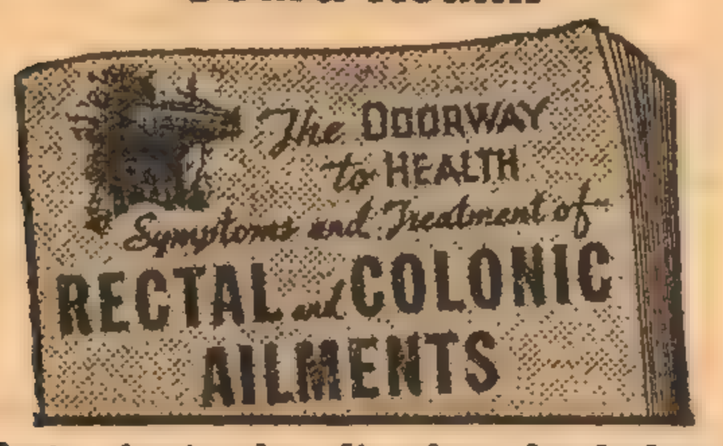

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That came sooner than he would have guessed. Keeping to the trail, he had ridden off the last timbered hill when he ran into the Scissors crew with the sheriff. Toms looked friendly. He said he had told the sheriff about the calves that had been branded the night before, and that this morning they had cut enough range stuff to find the evidence.

"We come runnin', figgerin' on keepin' Beck an' Cully from killin' yuh," he explained further. "Looks like it's the other way around!"

"He hung Al!" Beck gasped brokenly. "Hung him in the cabin! Sheriff, you're the law—keep him from swingin' me!"

The short ride had calmed Beck down some. However, his fear of being hanged astonished those who heard him. All but the sheriff.

"He blames Cully with the killin' of Vern Hobbs," Kidder related sadly. "Reckon only because it's to save himself."

"He done it!" Beck exclaimed.

"No doubt," the sheriff said drily. "But you and him both gunned Savage yesterday when he got too suspicious after this cowboy left."

"That's right," Toms said to Kidder's questioning gaze. "We corraled them Walkin' A ropers who was takin' orders to claim every other Scissors' calf for their boss. They talked."

"What about this hangin' of Cully?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"He done it!" Beck spoke up before Kidder could open his mouth. "He's swingin' in the cabin, poor Al is!"

The sheriff turned to two Scissors men, telling them to start for camp with Beck. No one else spoke until they were gone.

"What yuh figger caused Beck to blow up and lose his head like that?" Kidder asked, the question that had bothered him all this time.

"His brother was a gunslick who was hung by a mob years ago," the sheriff replied. "Since that time Beck has always gone hogcrazy about hangin's. Afraid of the same thing himself."

"Worked, didn't it?" Toms commented. "Though I reckon we had Cully dead to rights anyhow. Yuh shore wound up justice for yore friend Hobbs. Yeah," he added with a grin, "some of the boys remembered how Vern talked about yuh

and said yuh might visit him at the Scissors some day."

THE sheriff kneed his horse close to Roy Kidder, his eyes smoldering.

"So yuh couldn't wait for the law to hang Cully? Seems like the law says you can't do it yoreself. Yuh'll have to stand trial for bein' too anxious to see him get justice. Hand over yore gun!"

Grinning widely Kidder obliged. The lawman directed some of the men to watch his prisoner and asked others to help him get Cully's body down.

"Yeah," Kidder drawled, "likely Cully is gettin' plenty tired hangin' up there so long."

"How can a dead man get tired?" the sheriff blurted.

"Never asked one. Cully's just swingin' by his wrists."

Toms started laughing in great guffaws.

"Yuh shore worked a smart trick to unwind Beck! I got to hand it to yuh."

Kidder shook his head, and took his gun back from the sheriff.

"While puttin' the dead wood on them was my intention, I just put Cully up there because it came handiest in the time I had before Beck come r'arin' back."

They wouldn't believe that, giving Kidder knowing looks of approval. He said it was time he had another bite to eat, it being quite a while since the last meal.

"Go ahead," the sheriff said. "Me, I'm goin' up and personally give Cully the bad news."

BULLETS TALK LOUD

(Concluded from page 89)

of the gang led by the notorious Curly Bill.

Afterwards, he served as captain of the Santa Fe railroad guards. Then El Paso elected him city marshal. He resigned this job to become manager of the Estado Land and Cattle Company in Brewster County. But the citizens of that border county insisted on electing him sheriff.

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 10)

cause my secret ambition is to be a lion tamer.

A few moons back, I spent a day at one of the finest outdoor zoos in the world, in Balboa Park at San Diego, California. In a big cage, off to themselves, was a pair of half-grown mountain lions, which are special favorites of mine.

I went up to that cage and started some cat talk, such as I know. One of the handsome, sleek little critters was dozing on a tree limb. Right away, he perked up and listened. I don't know exactly what I said, but his interest grew, and in a little while down he came, over to the bars where I stood, rubbing himself playfully as though coaxing me to come inside.

In a Lion's Cage

One time I did go inside a lion's cage. It was at a Bronx Zoo, where I got to know a keeper and persuaded him to let me in with a full-grown cougar I'd made friends with from the outside.

I took it easy, approaching that 200-pound cat, but when I got in hand reach he did a surprising thing. He flopped down and rolled half over. As I stroked his smooth, tawny side, he purred like a tame house tabby.

Mountain lions—or cougars, panthers, pumas or whatever name you choose to give 'em—are really mild-natured cats. So are ocelots, that are found sometimes in south Texas, and which often are seen as pets. African lions seem to me to be more like dogs than members of the cat family. I think I could learn to get along with a tiger. But I'm not so sure about a jaguar or leopard. The one cat I don't hanker to take any chances with is the bobcat or lynx. Circus folks tell me that of all cats, the bobcat is the oneriest and hardest to handle.

They're Plumb Sociable

You hear shuddery yarns about hombres finding themselves stalked by mountain lions. On two occasions I've had 'em follow me, out in the wilds, but I claim that it was a sign of sociability. I've never heard a convincing story of a mountain lion attacking a man, not unless it was wounded or the man attacked it first.

The unhappy fact remains that these pred-

ators are bad medicine for stockmen, taking heavy toll of calves and sheep. In times past, I've helped hunt down killers, and once shot one. But if I had the chance again, I'd pass it up. That's the way I feel about mountain lions. As for poisoning wild critters, any wild critter, including the coyote, I'm dead set against it.

It might be that I'm just getting chicken-hearted in my old age. It's gone so far that I avoid stepping on ants, or even a wild-flower. These things have as much right to live as I have, it seems like, and should be given that right unless their end serves a more useful purpose than their existence.

Live and Let Live

Maybe the ant is a member of a colony of termites that aim to eat down my house, and maybe the wildflower sends off pollen that gives some hay fever victim the miseries, in which case they need stepping on. It's pretty hard, figuring out these things conscientiously, isn't it, gals and galluses? Live and let live is a hard motto to live up to. When you eat an egg, you're depriving some future rooster the pleasure of flapping his wings and crowing his gladness at the sunrise.

But I've made up my mind on one thing, and that is when I have a chance to look over my new property, the moon, and find that folks of some sort are living there already, I'll deal easy with 'em. Money isn't everything. Anyhow, I plumb doubt if moon money is much good!

—CAPTAIN STARR

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

THERE are strong and sinister forces marshaled against Jim Hatfield and other honest men in TROUBLE ON THE TRINITY, the pulsating novel by Jackson Cole which is featured in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS.

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[*Turn page*]

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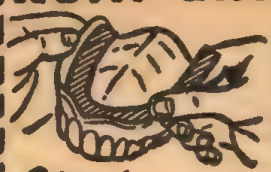

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On rode the men through the night. The dull beat of many hoofs grew in volume, as an owl hooted far away. Some of the night riders were masked but others had not bothered to pull up their bandannas to hide their brutal features. All were heavily armed with pistol carbine and knife. The orders were that no survivors were to be left at Ed Younker's ranch.

Scouts were sent ahead to see if those at the ranch were expecting trouble. When the scouts returned, saluting and reporting "All clear," the rest of the band moved on, and swung from the road into a winding lane. It led to a small ranchhouse on a rise overlooking the Trinity River. In the moonlight the shapes of the buildings stood out against the sky.

"Circle," ordered Roget.

Killers spread around and face in with ready weapons. General Roget rode to the house and hit the door several sharp blows with his revolver butt.

"Younkers!" he shouted.

After a few moments someone called from inside.

"Who's that?" a man demanded.

"General Roget, Younkers. My Horse has gone lame and I need help."

A light came on. The bar was lifted and the door opened. Ed Younkers, the rancher, raised his lantern peering out. He was about forty, with a lean, careworn aspect. Younkers had fought in the Confederate Army and had returned to find that his wife and child had died of fever. Slowly but surely he had been building up his property after the ruin of the war.

The lantern cast a shaft showing the grim general, and his two lieutenants the reptilian El Lagarto and the vicious Chang. Some of the toughs could be seen, silently watching.

"What's it about, Roget?" demanded Younkers, alarmed suspicion in his voice.

"Just this!" Roget threw up his gun and fired at Younkers. The rancher shuddered and crumpled on the doorsill.

"Hurry, get in there and clean up," cried Roget.

Younkers had two cowboys working for him, and they were killed in a brief but wild gunfight. Then the ranch buildings were burned at the general's orders, and finally the band departed leaving, death and smoldering embers behind them.

A second raid by the night riders was foiled when a young former lieutenant of the

Confederate Army, who had succeded in getting a job with Roget's sugar refining company in the town, warned the rancher of the coming attack. Thanks to Lieutenant Gale, Howling Sam Gildea, the owner of the Circle G, was ready when the raiders struck.

The raiders had been driven off, but at the office of the Texas Rangers chief in Austin Captain Bill McDowell received a telegram from Sam Gildea that sent him hollering for Jim Hatfield. In a few moments the big Ranger was in McDowell's office.

"Howdy, Cap'n," he said. "You sent for me?"

"Hatfield! Come in and sit down. There's double-barreled trouble on the Trinity. I have a complaint from a Trinity River rancher named Sam Gildea, once a major in Lee's forces. Gildea's Circle G ain't far from Rogetville, named after General Ambrose T. Roget. Yuh've heard tell of the General."

"Yes suh." Hatfield's tone was silky.

"First off I get a vague report that a cowman, Ed Younkers, and two cowboys were killed and the buildings burnt down there. Looked like wanton destruction by bandits, there was no sense to it. Only I've got to the point where there's always a reason for such a job."

"You're right," Hatfield said.

"Now Gildea wires me that Roget came to his home one night with a band of gunslingers, bent on wiping him off the map."

There were other angles to the situation so it was decided that Jim Hatfield had better investigate the trouble on the Trinity. With Buck Robinson, a sixteen year old boy who sometimes accompanied the Ranger on his missions, Hatfield finally arrived in Rogetville.

One of the first things he noticed when he looked over the town was a reward notice. Five hundred dollars was offered for the arrest of Major Samuel Gildea and Lieutenant Franklin Gale, wanted for treason and robbery. And that reward was signed by General Roget, as district commander.

Hatfield also discovered there were a number of hard looking men scattered about the town with guns ready as though ready to drygulch someone who was expected to ride into Rogetville. He waited to see what would happen.

Hatfield did not have long to wait. And what did happen makes TROUBLE ON THE

[*Turn page*]

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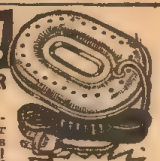

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OUR MAIL BAG

WE ARE always delighted to hear from our readers, so please write and tell us which stories you enjoyed most and which you did not like, in this and other issues of TEXAS RANGERS. Here are some excerpts from a few of the many letters recently received:

I have just read a late issue of TEXAS RANGERS. The lead story is RED RIVER RULE. I have read many Westerns, but TEXAS RANGERS is the best. Here is how I rate the ones I have read—THE DEVIL'S LEGION, not bad. PIRATES ON HORSEBACK, not bad. THE NESTER FEUD, good. THE STARLIGHT RIDERS, good. THE KIOWA KILLER, best. I write stories myself and some day I hope to climb as high as Jackson Cole. Don't change Jim Hatfield any, he's good enough now.—*Robert Hetherington, Keilliher, Saskatchewan, Canada.*

Well, sir, let me tell you something. The other night I was looking all over for something and my girl friend said, "What are you looking for, Slim?"

I said, "My TEXAS RANGERS."

She said, "What's *that?*"

I said, "You know I always keep a TEXAS RANGERS Magazine here to read while you're gone."

She said, "Eh, you don't have your mind on me, then, when I'm gone?"

I said, "Honey, I'm afraid I wouldn't get as great a thrill out of keeping my mind on you as I would reading TEXAS RANGERS!"

She jumped up and got her coat and out she went. But that's okay, I let her go—I'd rather

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have the magazine anyway. I've been reading it for a long time and wouldn't be without it.

Seriously, I was born in old Wyoming in 1903, wandered off down to Texas and spent the last part and the first part of my teen-age and manhood in the saddle, rounding up cattle, herding, riding fence and driving to market. Now I'm just trodding along, singing a song of you and me.—*Slim Rynnhart, Phenix City, Ala.*

Please leave Jim Hatfield single. I think Jackson Cole is the best writer that ever lived. Please start putting "Long Sam" back in the TEXAS RANGERS books and add some more onto "Doc Swap" stories. Seems as everybody is forgetting the editor but me—I think you are just grand. I am reading a copy of TEXAS RANGERS now when I should be working—but that can wait until I finish.—*Danny Paul Easly, Olny, Texas.*

Please let me inform you that the stories by Clee Woods appeal to us very much. My wife and I have just finished reading his story in your June magazine, TEXAS RANGERS. Title of story is CODE TO LIVE BY. We think it is a real story and wish to see more by the author. Your magazine is excellent in its class. All the stories are gripping, although simple and to the point. Kindly continue with this wholesome entertainment. I observe that in the main your stories contain a warning, a guide, or moral for the readers to use.—*Fulton D. Langille, Ancienne Lorette, Quebec, Canada.*

That's all selected for quotation this time, folks, but thanks to all the rest of you who wrote. And remember, let's hear from more of our readers. Please address all letters and postcards to the Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thanks again, everybody—see you next issue!

—THE EDITOR

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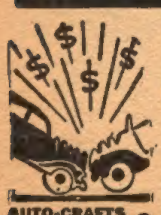

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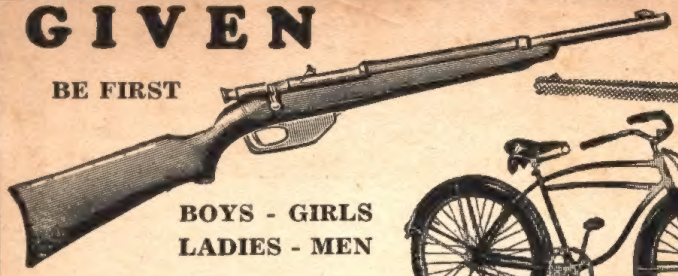

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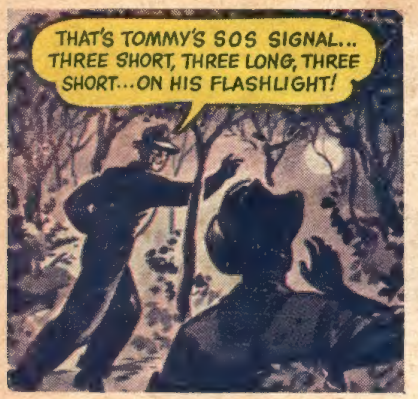

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